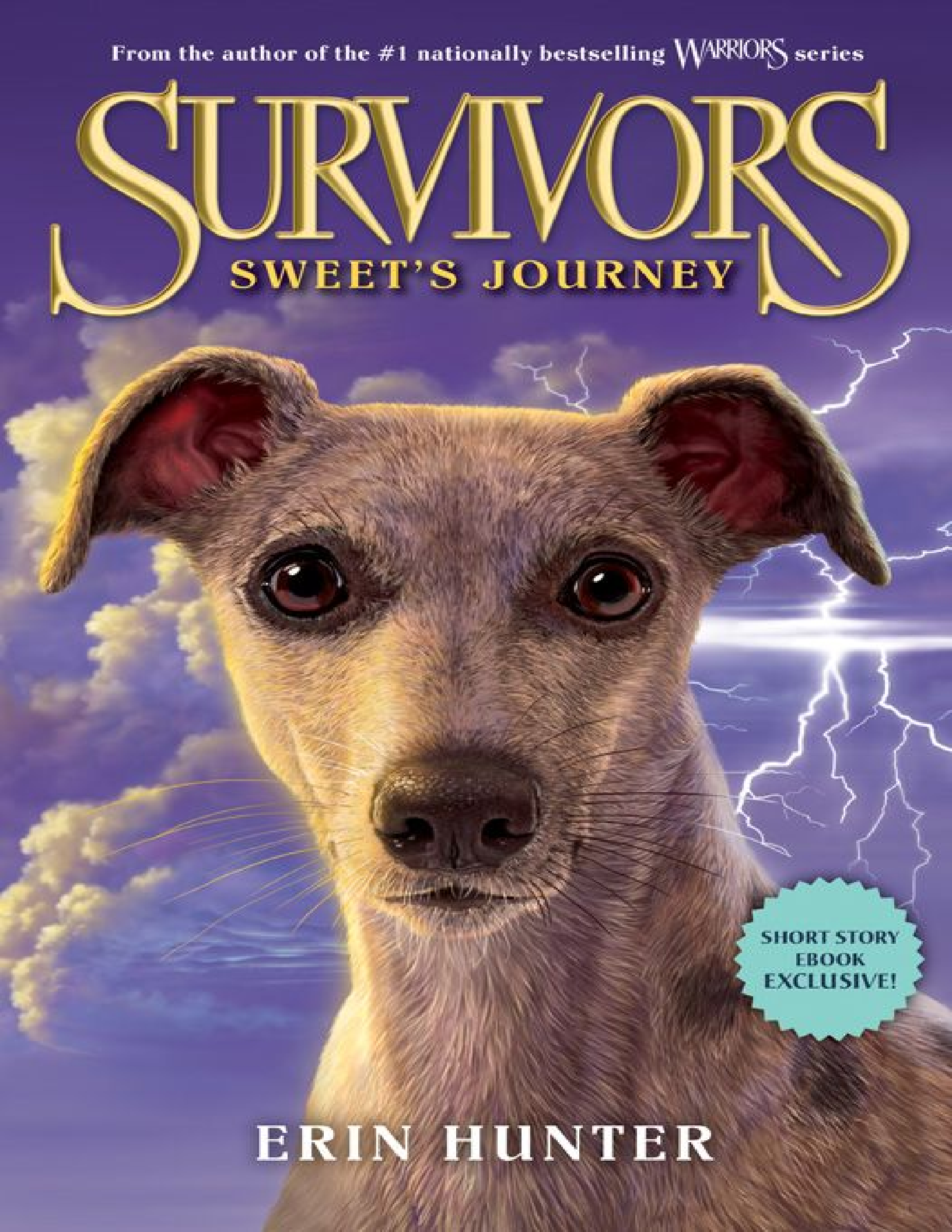
From the author of the #1 nationally bestselling WARRIORS series

SURVIVORS

SWEET'S JOURNEY



SHORT STORY EBOOK EXCLUSIVE!

ERIN HUNTER

SURVIVORS

SWEET'S JOURNEY

ERIN
HUNTER

HARPER
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DEDICATION

Special thanks to Gillian Philip

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CHAPTER ONE

Not my eyes, Callie! Not my eyes . . .

Sweet ducked and twisted out of reach just as the Beta lashed out her claws, the tip of one catching Sweet's cheekbone. Knocked off-balance, Sweet fell and rolled, then sprang back to her paws, snarling defiance, her fur and hackles prickling. She could feel blood beading on her face. If Callie's claw had found my eyeball . . . *She shuddered*.

Sweet gave her pelt a firm shake as the two of them circled each other warily, but she couldn't lose the tingling rage and frustration. In a challenge like this one—a challenge between dogs of the same Pack—aiming for a dog's eyes was forbidden. It wasn't just a vicious move, it was a stupid one. No dog wanted a Pack member maimed! And for swift-dogs like them, eyesight mattered even more. They were so fleet, so quick on their paws, they all needed their keen vision intact in a chase.

That didn't seem to matter to Callie. The Beta wanted to win at all costs, Sweet realized.

But there was another Pack rule Sweet didn't intend to break: no dog whined and cowered and complained about

their opponent's tactics in a challenge. The whole Pack was watching this fight.

Sweet curled the skin back from her muzzle, revealing her teeth. Callie was not *going to get the better of her, and that meant the Beta wasn't going to send Sweet whining to their Alpha, either. . . .*

Callie bunched her muscles and sprang again. Sweet lunged to meet her in midair.

Although it went against all her instincts, she closed her eyes, letting her other senses guide her. She could feel Callie's body right there, and the stir of her hot breath as the Beta snapped and bit at Sweet's face. Sweet spun and twisted, then sank her teeth into fur and flesh.

Yes! Opening her eyes, she realized her jaws were clamped on the side of Callie's neck. Taking advantage of the other dog's flinch, she flung her whole slender weight against Callie, and the Beta slipped and fell with Sweet on top, pinned to the ground.

I won, *Sweet thought, panting through her mouthful of fur as she straddled Callie's flank*. I finally beat her!

But Callie wasn't finished yet. She writhed and heaved, sending Sweet tumbling aside, and in moments Sweet was sprawled on the damp earth, the breath knocked out of her lungs. This time Callie was the dog on top, and her jaws were clamped on Sweet's scruff, holding her down. There was a light of hate in the Beta's eyes, and a chill swept through Sweet's blood along with the fury. Curse Callie!

But the awful chill that immobilized her didn't drain away. It filled Sweet's body, and seemed to seep out into the air around the two fighting dogs. It was instinct, warning her. . . .

Sweet shuddered. She remembered what happened next. And the fight wasn't the worst thing that had happened that day . . . the day of the Big Growl. . . .

The longpaws came from nowhere, and everywhere. They were all around the Pack, as if they'd been hiding inside the

very trees. Instantly Callie released Sweet, and they both lined up with their Packmates, growling their defiance at the longpaws.

Every muscle and bone in her body urged Sweet to run. Turn! Run! Go! *They were swift-dogs, weren't they? The longpaws were slow and clumsy. The dogs could all flee, right now, and if the rest wouldn't—Sweet could! She could run far away, faster than any longpaw—*

But the Pack was snarling and eyeing the longpaws that closed in from all sides. The Pack wanted to fight, to meet the longpaws' challenge and defeat them.

Madness! But if Sweet bolted—if she made a run for it—surely the others would follow. . . .

She couldn't battle the urge any longer. Spinning, Sweet fled, her speed carrying her away from the sticks and nets and the long flailing paws of the creatures looking to capture the dogs.

A moment later, Sweet skidded to a brief halt to look back. Her Pack . . . they weren't following! They stood their ground against the longpaws, and panic flooded through Sweet's belly. Raising her voice, she howled to them in dismay and grief.

Follow me! Follow me! Run with me *now*—

Her own broken howl jolted her out of sleep. Dazed, Sweet shook away the fuzziness of waking and hauled herself onto her forepaws. Her heart thrashed in her narrow chest and her fur was on end all over her body, but there were no longpaws here. No longpaws, no swift-dogs, no *Pack*. It had been a dream, that was all.

No, not a dream: a memory. A terrible memory.

Why? she thought miserably. *Why do I always have to dream about the day I* ran?

Slowly Sweet got to her paws, sniffing the strange air. The grass and earth were soft beneath her paw pads, and there

was no metal wire caging her in, no walls to stop her from running. This meadow was so much better than the Trap House, yet it wasn't a truly wild place. All around her, Sweet could feel the work of longpaws. The trees stood in ordered ranks, like dogs lined up for a battle. The grass was clipped and smooth, and the glinting river was channeled under a stone bridge that had been built with long, hairless paws. The air itself made Sweet's fur prickle.

It was a good enough place to sleep for one night, but it was no place for a wild swift-dog to live—especially a dog with no Pack. Remembering that she was alone now sent a shiver through Sweet's bones. She'd move on at once, she thought, a whine of sadness rising in her throat.

She missed Lucky already. How could he have let her go? How could he *want* to be alone, in this new world of all worlds? The kind, smart, golden-furred dog she'd met in the Trap House had insisted all along that he was a Lone Dog, but she hadn't quite believed him—not till he'd refused to come with her on her journey away from the destroyed city.

Sweet clenched her fangs in angry bewilderment. Lucky's attitude was madness; it was something she'd never understand, not till the day she went to the Earth-Dog. How could a dog not *want* to find a Pack? And Sweet knew she would find one: if not today, then tomorrow, or the next day. How could Lucky refuse to come with her to the forest? Ridiculous! There would be dogs there. There would be a Pack she could join to find new strength, a Pack she could help by adding her own strength to theirs. That was the way of dogs; it was what dogs were *for*!

A little tremor of fear went through her belly. Maybe she shouldn't even have paused to rest in this strange longpaw meadow. Perhaps any dogs who had left the city would have trekked too far by now; perhaps she would never catch up with them. The very thought made Sweet shiver.

No, she reassured herself. A Pack needed a camp, and once dogs found a safe place to make their territory, they'd

stay there. As long as her nose didn’t let her down, she’d find them; she was sure of it.

Sweet couldn’t resist breaking into a steady, swift lope as she headed for the forest. Already she could smell it: the rich scent of pine needles and rotting leaves and damp, cool hollows. No clear dog-scents yet, but she was confident those would come. She had only to reach those dense trees that stretched for countless chases, and she’d find a Pack.

She *had* to find a Pack.

At the edge of the forest she didn’t even hesitate, but leaped over a fallen log and ran into its darkness, darting and dodging through the thick ranks of pine and aspen. Her heart beat harder and faster as she plunged deeper into the trees, and not just because of her swift-dog pace. There *were* dog-scents here, and lots of them.

Hopelessly confused and jumbled dog-scents.

Each time Sweet lowered her slender nose to catch a whiff of a dog and follow its trail, she would lose it, distracted and misled by other trails that overlaid it. She would follow the stronger scent, only to lose it again among other scent-markers. Many dogs had passed through the forest—perhaps too many, she realized with a quiver of panic. How would she ever find and follow a clear trail in this maze of smells?

The whole world was tangled and turned upside down, that was the problem. But as soon as she thought that, Sweet felt oddly reassured. The Big Growl had turned the world into a place of madness and confusion, and of course things would not be as easy as they’d once been. What mattered, she told herself confidently, was that there were *dogs*. At any moment she’d find a strong trail and follow it, and she’d find a new Pack that needed her contribution. And as soon as she had a Pack, the craziness of the world wouldn’t matter. Pack was everything.

There were other scents to distract her, Sweet realized as she paused to sniff at a pine’s exposed roots. Smaller,

darker, sharper trails, made by scurrying prey. Her empty belly rumbled, and hunger nipped at her.

I'll think better with a full belly.

Making her decision, she reluctantly abandoned the dog-scents for the moment and began to nose her way along one of the stronger prey-trails. Slowing, placing her paws with care, she scanned the undergrowth, her ears pricked forward. *Be silent, Sweet. You're hunting alone . . . for now. . . .*

There! A movement in the undergrowth. A vole; Sweet caught a glimpse of its russet back and its short tail. It saw her, and darted for the shelter of the forest litter, but Sweet was fast, and she was hungry. She shot forward and snatched it up in her jaws, crunching and gulping it down, bones, tail and all.

It was small, she thought as she licked her jaws, but big enough to take the edge off her hunger.

A new sense of urgency drove her on now, her trotting stride rapid, and she hadn't gone many rabbit-chases before she broke once more into a loping run. Her nose searched every hint of breeze, every stir of the dank forest air, and her heart clenched tight. *What if I never find those dogs?*

The scent hit her quite suddenly, filling her nostrils, and she came to a halt, head raised.

It was a scent she recognized from earlier in the day, but it seemed clearer and stronger now; perhaps it was just that she had had the sense to fill her belly. Sweet focused hard on the messages it brought her, and she drew in a sudden, hopeful breath.

That's a swift-dog! I'm sure of it!

In an instant, visions of her life with the swift-dog Pack flitted across the eye of her mind, sending pangs of regret through her. Callie the Beta had bullied and intimidated her, it was true, but Sweet had been loyal to her Pack; she had loved them. The memory of her Packmates being rounded up for the Trap House, the echoes of their howls as they

were captured, filled her head with chaos and misery, and Sweet had to crouch down in the dry fallen leaves, pressing herself close against the ground and flattening her ears.

She and Lucky had been the only dogs to make it out of that Trap House alive when the Big Growl struck. She had been certain of it. . . .

But now, she wasn't so sure.

Is every one of my Packmates truly dead? Sweet realized she didn't know, and she didn't even want to believe it. *Maybe some of them escaped the longpaws. Maybe some of them were never captured at all. . . .*

There was no choice to be made; she had to follow this scent. Sweet sprang to her feet, and set off at a run again. If any of her Packmates were still alive, she *had* to track them down. The recognition was followed instantly by a horrible bolt of shame.

I ran.

Of course I ran. I'm a swift-dog, it's what I was born for. . . .

But I ran when my Pack was in trouble, and the longpaws caught me on my own.

If she hadn't fled like a coward, Sweet realized, she'd know what had happened; she'd know whether any of her Pack had escaped the longpaws' attack. She'd have shared their fate. Maybe they'd have all died, been crushed in the collapse of the Trap House, but at least they'd have been *together*.

My Pack.

Desperately she raced on, following the scent almost blindly, so when the trees ended suddenly in a bright expanse of meadow, she skidded, shocked. The sun was bright overhead, dazzling her eyes after the shadows of the forest, and she could hear the sound of running water.

Flanks heaving, Sweet sniffed the air. *The river!* She was so thirsty . . . and she remembered how her Pack had loved to swim. They'd splashed and swum in the cool, clear

stream sent by the River-Dog, the stream that washed grit and grime from a dog's fur and soothed aching paw pads. . . .

Sweet trotted eagerly toward the bank, but within a rabbit-chase of the water's edge she halted. The delicate scent of the river was overlaid with something stronger, something unpleasant. As she drew closer it stung her nostrils, making her wrinkle her muzzle and back away.

Her stomach churned as she stared at the rippling stream, flecked now with yellow foam. Was the river sick?

Uncertainly she began to pace along the bank, angling her head away from the water to avoid the increasing stench. Even the dry tightness in her throat couldn't persuade her to lap at that sickly scum. *But if I want to go farther, I'll need to cross the water. Is it safe to swim in it?*

With a rush of relief, she saw ahead of her one of the longpaw bridges that crossed stretches of water. It didn't look as new and solid as the one she'd seen that morning. The timber was damp in places, dark with rot, and the whole thing swayed alarmingly as the torrent beat against it—but it was at least in one piece.

Sweet glanced back at her flanks. She'd never been a heavy or even a sturdy sort of dog, and now her ribs showed clearly through her hide. Even so, she wasn't sure the fragile bridge would hold her weight.

But what choice do I have? Sweet sighed inwardly.

I need a Pack so badly. I have to try. . . .

After all, hadn't that swift-dog—the one whose scent she'd caught—made it over the bridge? She could smell its scent, leading her across. If she wanted to reach that dog, Sweet had to follow. Catching her breath, she placed a tentative paw on the first shaky planks.

It seemed to sag under her slender weight, but as she set another paw beside the first, the bridge settled and steadied. One by one, she brought her hindpaws onto the surface too, and stood still for a moment, trembling.

Every muscle in her body tensed as she edged forward, ready to leap back at the first sign of collapse. One glance at the rushing water below her, scum-flecked and oddly yellowish, made Sweet more certain than ever that she didn't want to fall in.

Beneath her creeping paws, the bridge groaned, and she stopped, one paw in the air. *Don't startle it*, she told herself.

One more step, and she heard a terrible screeching creak behind her. Hardly daring to look back, she stopped again, heart slamming against her ribs. *It's going to fall. . . .*

Slowly she craned her head around, pricking her ears with anxiety, and she felt a sinking sensation like a stone in her belly.

I've come too far across! I can't *go back*.

There was only one thing for it: *go forward*. Panting, Sweet bunched her muscles, her whole body quivering. Briefly she shut her eyes, then snapped them open.

Springing forward, Sweet bolted, running as she'd never run before. She could barely feel the rotting wood beneath her paws; she could only hear the creak and rumble and splash as chunks of the bridge fell away behind and beneath her. She was sure she was running on nothing but thin air, her claws scrabbling for purchase, her panting breath stabbing like teeth in her chest. As the roar of collapse filled her ears, she leaped for the bank.

Sweet crashed to the solid ground on her flank, legs still flailing, but she'd made it. And only just in time. Rolling over and stumbling to her paws, she saw the foaming water engulf the shattered bridge as the River-Dog gulped it greedily down.

Oh, River-Dog, you must have been hungry. . . .

Still panting for breath, her chest aching, Sweet dipped her head and closed her eyes. *Thank you, River-Dog, for letting me cross before you ate the bridge*.

As the shock faded, a whine of unhappiness built inside her, escaping at last in a choked whimper.

And River-Dog? If my friend Lucky comes to you? Please, please find a way to let him cross too. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

The Sun-Dog was slinking alarmingly close to the horizon behind her as Sweet padded on, her paws aching with every step. The sky ahead had darkened to a grayish blue, but there was still enough light for her to make out the terrible wounds in the earth.

She skirted them widely whenever she caught sight of one, her fur bristling, her heart pounding. The scars were scratched deep in the ground, and some plunged so far down into blackness, Sweet couldn't make out where they ended. They were jagged and horrible, as if some monster had dug its claws into the land and torn out its insides.

And a monster *had* done just that, Sweet realized in horror. The Big Growl had inflicted these dreadful wounds.

Poor Earth-Dog. She must be in such pain. . . .

Sweet's nostrils twitched. Ahead of her there was the smell of old and dead fires, like the cold remnants of a forest blaze, but fainter. She could only press on, but she moved with much more caution now, her eyes peering ahead into the dimming twilight. Old cinders and ashes were not the

only scent that reached her. There was a frightening tang, strong but fading, of longpaws.

Every sense alert, every muscle tensed to run, Sweet crept closer to the source of the odors. *I have to go through this place. There's no other way to find that swift-dog*.

She jerked back, hackles rising, as she nearly trod in a shallow pit. Wrinkling her muzzle, she sniffed at it. Blackened ash and charred logs, but they were cold and dead. Glancing around, she noticed more small pits, and planks of wood raised up on legs. *The kind of place a longpaw would sit*. But why would longpaws make small fires in the forest?

There was no sign or sound of longpaws, though; only their fading smell, so Sweet forced herself to pad on through the darkening evening. Beyond a line of trees she saw the faint glint of light on metal, and she paused to sniff the air.

They were loudcages, she realized—huge ones, their black rubber paws motionless and overgrown with grass. There was no smell of the fire-juice that the longpaws fed their smaller loudcages. Feeling a little more confident, Sweet crept forward and eased between two of the huge cages.

There was no movement at all. In the flank of the one on her left, a flap of metal swung open, creaking in the light breeze.

Gathering her courage, Sweet climbed carefully up the metal steps that led to the hole, and poked her head cautiously inside the loudcage. Still there was no sign of life. The loudcage smelled strongly of longpaws; their furs had been left draped across seats and hanging on hooks, and there was a trace of a food-smell. Not an especially nice food-smell, thought Sweet as she nosed at a gaping door; it reminded her of spoil-boxes in the city, with their reek of rot and decay. The longpaws must have made a den inside this cold and empty cage.

What strange creatures the longpaws were. . . .

She shivered. There was nothing for her here. She'd rather hunt for herself, alone, than trust the longpaws' abandoned food. Backing out of the loudcage and down the metal steps, she shook herself and trotted quickly on between two rows of the huge loudcages. As she passed one beast, the familiar swift-dog scent struck her nostrils, making her paws falter.

It was so much stronger now. Stronger, and terribly familiar . . .

Callie!

Changing direction, Swift trotted on into the trees beyond the loudcages. She had to find her former Beta, though she hoped very much that there were other swift-dogs with Callie. Would her old enemy even be happy to see Sweet? She doubted it.

Her paw steps slowed, uncertain, as the scent grew stronger. No, there were no other dogs here—and Callie's trail was still. The Beta had not moved for a while. Sweet cocked her head, curious and alert.

Was that a whimper?

If Callie's hurt, she won't be able to help me. And I might not be able to do anything for her. I could just walk away. . . .

No, she realized, with a jolt. *That's not the kind of dog I am. I'm a Pack Dog, and Packmates don't abandon each other. No matter what*.

The decision gave her new courage. Pacing forward into the tree shadows, she saw a shape lying quite still, its flanks moving jerkily with each shallow breath.

"Callie?" Sweet murmured hesitantly.

The dog raised its head, ears coming forward, but the eyes were bright with pain and resentment.

"Callie, it *is* you."

Callie whimpered, wincing with pain at even the small movement. Then her voice lowered to a disdainful growl, and her muzzle curled.

“Well, if it isn’t Sweet. The dog who ran away,” she sneered. “Want a fight, do you? I’m sure you’ll be able to beat me now. Coward.”

Sweet took a breath. Callie’s words were like a claw in her gut, and she almost wished the Beta was fit enough to attack her physically. That might have hurt less. And the sting of Callie’s accusation was all the worse for being true. In the Pack’s moment of greatest peril, Sweet had turned tail and fled.

She swallowed hard. “I’m not here to fight you, Callie.”

“Oh? In that case, you might as well go ahead and mock me. I won’t be fighting again.” Callie’s muzzle peeled back from her fangs.

“I wouldn’t do that either.” Sweet padded forward and around to Callie’s side. Still the wounded swift-dog didn’t move, and Sweet took a breath when she saw the deep gash in Callie’s flank. Worse, one of her hind legs flopped uselessly to the side, crushed and bleeding. Sweet blinked, overwhelmed by pity.

“Don’t look at me like that,” snarled Callie.

Composing herself, Sweet tried to sound matter-of-fact. “What happened, Callie?”

“You get to call me Callie now, do you?” the swift-dog sneered. “Because I’m not your Beta anymore? You would not dare be so insolent if I could *move*.”

“The reason you’re not my Beta is because our Pack is gone,” snapped Sweet, then calmed herself again. There was nothing to be gained from a squabble. She tried again: “What happened?”

Callie grunted. “I escaped from the Trap House. Like you, I suppose. I thought you’d died with the rest. I came through the forest, crossed the river; I did *all that*. And then I made the mistake of smelling food in one of these cursed things.” She jerked her head at the nearest loudcage. “Tried to climb into its belly. It lost its balance and fell on top of me. So much for my swift-dog speed, eh? I’ll never run again.”

“Callie.” Sweet dipped her nose to lick her old Beta’s ear. “I’m so sorry.”

For a moment Callie was silent, then at last she said gruffly: “I won’t even walk again. I’m done for, Sweet.”

Sweet nuzzled her, unable to think of anything to say.

“I was once a racing dog, you know,” said Callie dreamily, after a long silence. “I would run for longpaws. They liked that. They liked to see us swift-dogs run in a circle, chasing a dead hare. As if we thought it lived, and we could catch it. Ha! We liked to win, that was all. Never mind the longpaws; we hated them anyway. It was each other we raced for. We were slaves to the longpaws, but among our Pack we had honor.”

“I’m sure you did,” murmured Sweet.

“They gave us our names. ‘Callie’ is short for some ridiculous longpaw word, you know? *California Dreamer*, they called me. Ridiculous name; who needs one so long? I was ‘Callie’ to my Pack.” Her eyes grew misty. “It’s been a good name.”

“A very fine name.” *For a fine dog*, Sweet wanted to add, but she didn’t think Callie would appreciate it. Her old Beta might think she was mocking her. Sweet felt a surge of unexpected grief.

“When we stopped being any use to the longpaws, they’d abandon us,” Callie went on. “That was when I started to be happy.” She gave a gruff laugh. “But they had other animals, animals that did the same as us. Ran in circles. Because the longpaws liked it. And the longpaws would do worse than abandon them.”

“What animals?” Sweet pricked her ears forward, curious.

“Horses. You heard of those? No, didn’t think you would. They’re bigger than us, but just as breakable.” Callie gave her crushed leg a filthy glare. “Big bodies on skinny legs, those horses. They’d break a leg, sometimes. Then the longpaws would get out their loudsticks and shoot them in the head.”

“*Shoot* them?” Sweet blinked, mystified.

“I don’t know exactly what it means, but that was the word. The loudsticks spat something that killed them. No use, a horse that can’t run. I used to think it was cruel,” Callie mused thoughtfully. “But you know what, Sweet?”

“What?”

“I wouldn’t mind a longpaw with a loudstick right now.”

“Callie, don’t say that!” Sweet licked her face desperately.

“What else would I say? Listen to me.” Callie twisted her head to glare into Sweet’s eyes. “I’ll never run again. I’m never going to *walk*. You’ve had my neck in your jaws before, Sweet. Finish what you started then. Sink your teeth into my throat and get this *over with*.”

Sweet shivered and backed away, whining softly. “I can’t do that, Callie. I could never do that.”

“Why not? You hate me, don’t you?”

“I hate no dog!” barked Sweet fiercely, still backing away.

“There you go again.” Callie’s lip curled back from her teeth. “Running away from your problems.”

Sweet hesitated, then crept back to Callie’s side. She lay down, careful not to brush the terrible wound in the Beta’s flank. “Callie, I won’t kill you. But I’m not running away. Am I?”

Callie sighed, lowering her muzzle to her forepaws. “No. No, I don’t suppose you are. You’re a good dog, Sweet. Don’t laugh. I’ve always known you were a good dog. A better dog than me.”

“Don’t say—” But Sweet stopped as Callie gave an agonized whimper of pain. “Callie?”

Callie sucked in a breath, and her sides heaved. The movement opened up the wound even more, and Sweet felt a gush of new, warm blood against her flank. Shocked, she licked Callie’s wound, very gently. Then she shifted away, afraid of hurting her.

“Would you mind moving ’round to the other side?” Callie’s growl was barely audible. “You can lie against me

there. I’m cold.”

Sweet slunk around to Callie’s other flank, so that she could no longer see the blood pooling beside her old Beta’s body. She lay down again, pressing close to Callie, and heard the swift-dog give a soft growl of gratitude.

“Callie?” Sweet murmured quietly, pressing her nose gently to the other dog’s shoulder.

There was no sound, though Callie’s flanks stirred for a while, in and out with shallow breaths. Callie didn’t speak again, and Sweet barely noticed the moment when the gentle movement of her rib cage stopped altogether.

CHAPTER THREE

I never really cared for Callie, thought Sweet, gazing back numbly at the swift-dog's motionless body. *But I never wanted this to happen*.

She sat back on her haunches, gathering her thoughts, not wanting to abandon her former Beta quite yet. *It's the Big Growl*, she realized with a chill of dread. *Everything has changed because of it. We don't know who our friends and our enemies are. We don't even know if the Spirit Dogs are on our side*.

It had been bad enough imagining her Pack dying in the carnage and chaos of the Trap House; actually watching Callie die had twisted Sweet's insides with horror. And now she felt more alone than ever. *Is this what happened to them all? Every single one of my Packmates—have they all gone to the Earth-Dog the way Callie just did?*

Oh, I miss Lucky even more. . . .

But there was no way of getting back to him, she realized. She'd probably lost the City Dog's scent, and his company, forever. What was more, the bridge was gone, and the River-Dog wouldn't let her cross back—if the River-Dog even

cared anymore what happened to her. River-Dog was probably concerned only with her own terrible sickness.

We're all on our own from now on. But if the Spirit Dogs can't or won't help us, that makes it all the more vital to find a Pack.

With one last sad look at Callie's remains, Sweet turned and plodded away, following the same stars as before. There was no point going back; she could only press on. The stars seemed so much farther away now, though, and the night felt colder.

Sweet did her best not to run, knowing she should save her energy. Short, sharp bursts of speed would do her no good here; how far she would have to travel, no dog knew. But still her muscles and paw pads ached by the time the Sun-Dog rose behind her.

By his low, golden light she could clearly see more of those cruel gashes in the earth as she traveled on. They were worse even than the wound in Callie's flank, the wound she'd died of. Was Earth-Dog dying too, Sweet wondered?

How can she possibly survive this?

A black misery settled over her, but it lifted just a little when she crested the rise of a grassy knoll and saw a line of distant lilac hills. If she could reach that high ground, she might be able to spot her old Pack's territory.

Though I doubt I'll find any of my old friends. Sweet heaved a sigh of grief, then shook herself. *Callie and I survived the Trap House. Maybe some of the others did . . . ? Even one . . . ?*

As she forced her aching legs to move, every step jolting her slender joints, she began to catch dog-scents again, and her ears pricked with hope. At the same time, her skin tingled, alert to the chance of danger. The scents grew thicker and more numerous the farther she walked, and there were none she recognized. Every tree and every rock was thick with dog-markers, filling her nostrils with

overpowering messages, and Sweet knew this must be the territory of a Pack.

I will have to be submissive to get through this territory in search of my friends. Nerves jangled beneath her fur. *Be careful, Sweet, be wise . . . and be humble*.

Taking a deep breath, she paused, then headed for the dark line that marked the beginning of a forest. She didn't want to be caught unawares. Sweet placed each delicate paw with care, her ears alert for the slightest noise, the tiniest movement in the shadows.

Her caution was unnecessary. With a crashing of undergrowth, a muscular red dog bounded out of the trees and stood foursquare, growling and glaring at Sweet.

"Stop right there, intruder. No dog trespasses on our land!"

Sweet swallowed hard, lowering her forequarters and wagging her tail. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to trespass."

The red dog's lip curled. "Then what are you doing here?"

Sweet let her tongue loll, trying to look as friendly as she could. "I'm looking for my own Pack, that's all. Have you seen any other dogs like me?"

The red dog gave a bark of laughter. Her eyes were narrow and contemptuous. "Like you? There are no dogs like you on this territory. They wouldn't survive!" She paced forward, circling Sweet and sniffing at her disdainfully. "You're skinny. You're weak. Any dogs like you will have taken a very wide path around, because our Pack doesn't tolerate weaklings. Are you prepared to fight your way through us?"

Sweet turned her head to watch the red dog. She was frightened, but she didn't want to make any sudden moves. "All I want is to pass through here. I'll keep moving, I promise. And I wouldn't dream of hunting on your territory."

The red dog laughed again. "As if we'd let you!"

It seemed so horribly unfair and unreasonable, after all she'd been through. Sweet clenched her jaws to stop herself

growling. As the red dog walked around to face her directly once more, Sweet slowly stood upright, meeting her gaze defiantly.

An expression of surprise crossed the red dog's face, but then her muzzle curled. She ground her forepaws into the earth, her shoulder muscles bunching for an attack—but at that moment, a pale shape appeared in the trees behind her.

Sweet took a single step back, startled but curious. Her nose twitched at the new dog's strange scent. As he came forward, the red dog's attitude seemed to change instantly. Her head dipped slightly in submission, her hackles lowered and the aggression melted away as she stepped aside.

He must *be her Alpha*, thought Sweet. *He has all the power here—it's as clear as the scent-markings on the boundary trees*.

He was a massive creature, as close to a wolf as Sweet had ever seen. His shaggy fur was rippling shades of black, gray, and white, and his eyes glowed yellow and fierce, but without the snarling aggression of the red dog. Behind him came an even bigger dog, burly and blunt-faced, and a much smaller white-and-tan female with a mean expression.

"Who's this, Beta? And what is her business in my territory?" The half wolf's rumbling voice seemed to silence every sound in the forest.

Sweet ducked her head quickly and respectfully, opening her jaws to respond, but the red dog got there before her.

"She's begging for passage through the woods. Can't survive without her friends," she sneered. "Though I doubt they've survived anyway. We should get rid of her—drive her back where she came from. It will be kinder in the long run, Alpha."

Sweet gathered her dignity and stood straighter, ignoring the red dog to address the half wolf directly.

"I don't mean to cause trouble," she told him, quietly but firmly. "And I won't. If you're willing to let me pass through

your territory, I won’t hunt. You can send a dog with me as an escort, to make sure.”

The half wolf said nothing for long moments; he just examined her with that piercing yellow gaze. Sweet couldn’t suppress the tremor that went through her muscles, but she managed not to let it show. The whole forest seemed to hold its breath until at last the half wolf gave an upward jerk of his head.

“Very well.” There was a look in his eyes she couldn’t quite read. “Fiery here will escort you through to the far edge of our territory. But don’t get your hopes up. There have been no other swift-dogs in the forest that I’ve seen—and I see everything.”

“Which doesn’t mean,” snarled the red dog, in obvious annoyance at the Alpha’s concession, “that you can come crawling back to us when you fail. We’ve enough mouths to feed without a useless creature like you.”

Sweet expected the Alpha to confirm his Beta’s sentiments, but to her surprise he said nothing. He swung his great head to stare at the red dog. After only moments, the Beta averted her eyes and licked her jaws, scowling.

“I won’t be back,” said Sweet proudly. “I won’t be a burden to any Pack, believe me. I’m looking for dogs like me—a Pack that’s *welcoming*.”

A hint of amusement crossed the Alpha’s stern face, and his muzzle wrinkled. He knew full well, thought Sweet, that her remarks were aimed at his Beta. The red dog was silent, but her hackles bristled.

With a last nod to the Alpha, Sweet followed the burly dog Fiery as he led her into the forest, following clear dog-trails that hinted at a well-established, well-organized Pack. Fiery’s sheer size was intimidating, but Sweet found that she wasn’t scared of him. He murmured an occasional word to guide or reassure her, but on the whole was amiably silent for the whole long trek, till Sweet saw a stretch of water glint between pine trunks.

Fiery led her to its edge, then jerked his head toward it.

“Here,” he said gruffly. “We’re nearly at the edge of our lands, and you’d better have a drink to keep you going. It’ll be a long walk before you find any other dogs.”

“Thanks,” she told him, dipping her muzzle to drink. The water was cold and clear and pure, and it tasted of the earth and the forest. Sweet shivered as she remembered the sick river she’d had to cross, and she closed her eyes briefly to thank the River-Dog for bringing her to better water. She drank for a long time, reminded suddenly of how thirsty she was.

“I wish you good luck,” growled Fiery, gazing across to the distant forest beyond the lake. “I hope you do find a few of your Pack. It’s been a bad time for all dogs.”

“Thank you,” said Sweet. She licked her chops and padded carefully into the water, cooling her paws. “I have to hope some of them survived.”

The big dog nodded slowly. “Our Pack lost a few dogs in the Big Growl too. I’m sorry we couldn’t be more welcoming, but every dog is afraid. Who knows if the bad times are over?”

Sweet turned her head to watch his eyes, and when she saw the fear in them, her own anxiety sparked into new life. If a dog so powerful could still fear the Big Growl’s return, what hope was there for a fragile swift-dog? She shivered.

“I hope the bad days *are* over,” she told him softly. “But I don’t think any dog can trust that they are.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Sweet was stunned at the chaos she found beyond the half wolf's territory. She and her Pack had lived in what she'd thought was *the wild*, but here in the more remote forest it was as if all the order of the world had been destroyed, as if the Spirit Dogs had abandoned the land to ruin. Mighty trees had toppled like saplings, their branches broken and the leaves stripped and scattered. Great rips had been opened in the earth, ragged and yawning, and massive rocks had tumbled loose from their sockets, crushing plants and creatures alike. There were signs of scorching, as if Lightning had leaped to the earth over and over again in a panic, and some stretches of ground were charred wastelands.

Sweet's nostrils flared in dismay. There were so many small corpses crushed here, so much carrion, even the crows couldn't keep up. Fat and sleek—unlike the other forest creatures—they hopped and strutted and flapped onto fallen branches, cocking their black heads arrogantly to watch her pass.

Earth-Dog, were you really so angry with us all? You haven't even consumed the dead. . . .

Sweet was glad to leave the low-lying, destroyed land, to feel the ground begin to rise beneath her paws once more, and as the trees thinned she felt a new urgency and energy. She bounded up the last slope to the crest of a sparsely treed ridge, and gazed out across open country, letting the stiff breeze bring its many scents to her nostrils.

But there were no dog-scents she could trace. Sweet's ears lowered in disappointment. There was nothing but the smell of the forest, and the distant reek of the sick river, reaching even as far as this. There was certainly no sign of land she recognized from her Pack's former camp.

The longpaws must have taken us far from our home when they caught us, she realized miserably. *I've no idea where to go from here. I've no idea if there's a home left that's worth finding*.

A ball of rage swelled in her gut, and Sweet gave in to it. Lifting her narrow head, she gave a furious bark.

"Why, Sky-Dogs? Why did you do this to us? Earth-Dog, what did we do wrong?"

Of course there was no answer, only the moan of the wind in the trees and the heedless song of birds.

"If I understood, I might feel better!" she howled.

Silence. Sweet sat back on her haunches, tucking her tail tightly beneath her, and stared out at the distant hills, and the amber glow of the drowsy Sun-Dog as he settled for the night.

If I wasn't alone, it wouldn't be so bad. Lucky, why did you have to be so stubborn?

She missed the City Dog more and more, with a deep keen ache. It was odd, when she'd known him for such a short time, but he'd been strong when she needed him. And clever, and funny, and kind.

And stupid! With all his Lone Dog nonsense!

She gave a sharp bark of irritation, then a soft unhappy whine; then at last she got to her paws and shook herself. Whatever she thought of Lucky's foolish notions, she had to follow his example. She was a Lone Dog for now, whether she wanted to be or not. So it was time to be strong, and look after herself.

The Moon-Dog was rising, clearer now that the Sun-Dog's light was dying, and the sky ahead was darkest blue. *I need to get going. I'll survive this, all of it*.

But where will I go?

The Moon-Dog's eye was full and round and white, huge against the twinkling stars. Sweet took a breath suddenly, cocking an ear, straining to listen.

Yes. Drifting on the light wind from far away, rising and falling, she could hear the echoing voices of a Pack singing to the Moon-Dog. *A Great Howl*, she thought, and longing tugged at her heart.

She remembered her own Pack's Howls, that sense of being *one* despite their petty daytime squabbles, the strong blood call of kinship and loyalty. She remembered how the real world seemed to fall away as they lifted their voices to the night, how she could sense the Wind-Dogs racing between them all, dodging and flying and howling with joy. She'd felt as if she herself was running, too, though she sat motionless among her friends, as if the Wind-Dogs were as one with all of them. Was that how other dogs felt? *I want to Howl again*, she thought. *I want to be one with a Pack. . . .*

The eerie distant howling thrilled into her blood, filling her with a new determination. She thought she recognized one of those voices, or perhaps two. That deep intent baying; was it Fiery? And that wild cry that spoke of wilderness and loss . . . *Yes*, thought Sweet. It was the half wolf and his Pack; she was sure of it.

I told them I wouldn't return, but I also said I wouldn't be a burden. And I won't! I'll earn *my way into their Pack*.

A little way down the slope, a rustling in the grass made her ears prick forward, and her body tensed. A rabbit! She licked her chops as saliva pooled in her mouth.

No dog could easily catch a rabbit alone. No *ordinary* dog. So no Alpha could fail to be impressed by a dog who could. Rabbits were so quick, so nimble, so very much faster than dogs. . . .

But not as fast as me.

The night was paling into dawn again by the time Sweet padded back into the Wild Pack territory. Her fur bristled with nerves, but her head was held high and proud, and between her jaws hung a sleek, plump rabbit.

“What in the name of the Sky-Dogs—” The deep powerful bark was full of shock, but Sweet didn’t flinch. She recognized Fiery’s voice, and for all his size he was a fair dog. He wouldn’t kill her. Not outright, not straightaway.

Dogs were gathering around her now, some snarling, some stunned into silence, some exchanging glances of disbelief. The red Beta barged forward, butting smaller dogs aside.

“What are you doing back here, Bony Dog?” Her voice was filled with contempt. “You’ve just made a big mistake. And your last!”

“Wait, Beta.” Fiery shoved easily through to her side, the smaller dogs moving hurriedly out of his way. “Look, she’s caught a rabbit. By herself.”

“That’s pretty impressive.” The white-and-tan dog nodded reluctantly.

“I’m certainly impressed,” said a black-and-white dog who was fat with puppies. She leaned against Fiery’s flank. “We could use her, Beta. There’ll be more mouths to feed soon.”

The red dog turned on them all, snarling. “Which means we don’t need another! Our Pack has all the dogs it needs!”

“That,” said a commanding voice, “is not your decision.”

The half wolf Alpha stepped forward through the ranks, lashing his bushy tail as he watched Sweet's eyes. He circled her, looking her up and down till Sweet's hide began to itch. But she stayed silent.

"Look at this," he told his Pack. "Not only an impressive catch, but the strength of will to carry it here without eating it." He nudged Sweet's bony ribs with his muzzle. "And it's not as if she isn't hungry. That's the kind of discipline I like."

"You're not serious?" yelped Beta. "We know nothing about her!"

Alpha looked from his Beta back to Sweet. Thoughtfully he cocked his head.

"We know she's a good hunter," he murmured. "She's clearly respectful, and has a sense of honor. What more could we ask for in a dog?"

"I don't believe this!" snapped Beta furiously, her hackles springing up. "You can't—"

"Can't?" echoed Alpha, a dangerous edge to his silky voice. "Are you telling me I can't do something, Beta? Because it's not the first time you've questioned my authority." His growl deepened. "It's not the first time you've betrayed your delusion that *you* are Alpha here."

"No, I—"

"Do you know better than I do? Do you think you'd make a better Alpha, perhaps? Would you like to . . . *challenge* me?"

Beta ducked her head, lowering her forequarters and backing off. Sweet could not miss the flash of terror in her eyes, and no wonder. The half wolf was much bigger and more powerful than the red dog—she wouldn't stand a chance if it came to a fight.

Alpha gave a snort of dismissal, and turned back to Sweet. "You may stay for now," he told her. "Prove yourself a valuable member of this Pack, and a loyal one"—he shot a glare at Beta—"and you can stay for good."

Murmurs of agreement went around the Pack as Sweet dipped her head in gratitude. The pregnant black-and-white

dog came forward to lick her nose.

“I’m Moon. I’ll show you where you’ll sleep,” she told Sweet cheerfully. “Welcome to our Pack!”

Sweet felt a wave of relief. *I’ve found a Pack. I’ll howl again at the next full moon!* But she couldn’t miss the glance Beta shot at her. As she turned and stalked away, the red dog’s eyes glowed with resentful hatred.

CHAPTER FIVE

“Come on, Sweet. Really attack me! I know you can do this!”

Fiery barked encouragingly, lifting his head to show a tantalizing glimpse of his soft throat. Sweet, still panting for breath after her last attempt, gave him a skeptical sidelong look. Bunching her muscles, she sprang again, only for his huge paw to whack her away. She rolled into a pile of leaves and lay there, flanks heaving as she tried to gather her dignity. It was five journeys of the Sun-Dog since she’d joined this Pack, and she was no closer to besting Fiery in a training fight.

“Go on,” he pleaded. “You’re nearly there. Try again!”

Sweet hauled herself up onto her forepaws. It was hard enough practicing fighting techniques with a dog the size of Fiery and a hunter as nimble and lithe as Snap. But it made it a lot harder when Beta sat there smugly in the shade of a tree, scoffing under her breath at all of Sweet’s feeble attempts.

Fiery was so helpful and enthusiastic, Sweet didn’t have the heart to point out how wrong this all was. For a fragile

and slender dog like her, Fiery's fighting strategies weren't appropriate at all, based as they were on sheer overwhelming power. Still, she hauled herself to her paws and tried again, launching herself at his shoulders and hanging grimly on.

He shook her off with a quick jerk of his massive body, and she thumped once more to the ground.

"Oh, well done, Sweetie." Beta's voice was full of sarcastic delight.

Oh, shut up, Beta, thought Sweet grimly. *You're loving this, aren't you?* Her body already ached in more places than she'd thought possible. At this rate, she wouldn't be fit even for patrolling.

"Never mind, *Sweetie*, I believe Omega can be a very fulfilling job."

Rage boiled up in Sweet's gut. With a growl of bitter resentment, she launched herself at the unprepared Fiery, seizing his scruff in her jaws, and forcing him down with the sheer weight of her fury. He was back on his paws in moments, but he shook himself and licked her in congratulation.

"Nicely done!" he barked. "See, you can do it!"

"Of course she can," agreed Snap happily.

"Huh!" Beta got to her paws and strode forward. "This is fighting practice, not mothers playing battle games with their pups! This is the Pack's survival we're talking about. I know you two feel protective, but she's useless. Those legs would break in a strong wind, for the Sky-Dogs' sake!"

Panting hard, Sweet glowered at Beta. The red dog reminded her of Callie, and the way she'd taunted and bullied Sweet in her old Pack. Beta knew just how to provoke her, just as Callie had. And Sweet couldn't help wishing for a moment that Beta would meet the same fate. . . .

No, she scolded herself. *That's not Pack thinking*. Snap and Fiery were looking away, unwilling to interfere between

Sweet and their Beta. Sweet gave Beta a simpering, over-friendly, very insincere whine, just to irritate her.

The red dog glowered at her as Alpha paced over to them. “What’s all the noise?” barked the half wolf.

Beta started, and gave him a nervous look. “I was giving them some fighting advice. That’s all.”

Alpha’s face was cold and expressionless. “Interesting. I’ve never heard quite such *loud* advice.”

“Sorry,” Beta muttered, licking her chops as she backed sullenly away.

“Fiery,” said Alpha sharply. “Show me what you were all working on. Then I can see what got Beta so worked up.”

Fiery nudged Sweet. “Come on. Show Alpha what you can do.”

Sweet took a breath, bunching her muscles in preparation for what she knew was coming. Sure enough, Fiery stretched his jaws in a grin, then sprang onto her. He knocked her flying, gripping her slender neck in his soft jaws and wrestling her to the ground.

Sweet wriggled desperately, trying to kick him off. *Come on, Sweet. Get angry again, that worked!*

The trouble was, she couldn’t get angry. It was all just so *silly*. She couldn’t fight like this!

Right. So I’m going to fail, in front of Alpha this time, and Beta will never let me hear the end of it. . . .

The very image of Beta’s mocking sneer gave her a sudden strength. Twisting sharply, Sweet writhed out of Fiery’s grip, grabbed his shoulder with her foreclaws and hauled herself on top of him. She sank her teeth into the folds of flesh at his neck, and held him down until he went limp. She had a feeling he was submitting for her benefit, so that she could impress Alpha, but she kept her teeth firmly locked on his neck. Around them, there was silence from the other dogs.

“Well,” said Alpha at last, tilting his muzzle skyward. “What’s wrong with that, Beta? It looks perfectly efficient to

me.”

“Fiery’s just—” began Beta, but Alpha cut her off.

“In fact, it looks a lot sharper than some of *your* moves.” The half wolf gave her a supercilious look. “I think Sweet’s a natural fighter.”

Despite his words, Sweet felt a twist of annoyance in her gut. What Alpha said sounded suspiciously like what the older swift-dogs used to tell her when she was a pup. *He’s indulging me*, she thought angrily. *Patronizing me—just to make a point to Beta*.

Maybe Alpha was trying to boost her confidence—which would be bad enough—or maybe he was using her, to keep his Beta in her place. Whatever it was, it didn’t sound honest to Sweet. She felt a growl rise in her throat, but she bit it back.

Without waiting for the stammering Beta’s response, Alpha turned with a flick of his bushy tail and stalked back toward his den. Beta watched him go, then turned her ugly stare on Sweet.

“This isn’t over,” she snarled. She twisted and bounded into the forest.

It’s not my fault! Sweet wanted to bark. Beta’s hostility felt like a gigantic paw on the back of her head, shoving her down into the mud. *I didn’t ask Alpha to praise me for something I didn’t do!*

She knew there was no point running after Beta, though. The red dog didn’t want to listen to anything she had to say. Sweet felt a warm flank pressing against her side: Fiery. Snap too sidled closer, giving her ear a reassuring lick.

“Don’t worry, Sweet,” rumbled Fiery. “Alpha likes you, that’s obvious. And that counts for a lot.”

“Yes,” agreed Snap. “And Beta had better watch her hindquarters.”

Sweet took a step back, startled, and met Snap’s eyes. “What do you mean?”

“Huh.” Snap tilted her head and cocked a brown ear. “Every dog knows Alpha and Beta haven’t been seeing eye to eye recently. Maybe you’re just what’s needed in this Pack to—”

“That’s enough, Snap,” growled Fiery sharply. “Don’t gossip about your leaders. There’s nothing honorable about that.”

Snap gave a dismissive hunch of her shoulders, but Sweet turned to her with horror. “I don’t want to cause any problems. All I wanted was a Pack, somewhere to belong. Somewhere to feel *safe*. I want to be an asset to this Pack, not make things worse!”

“That’s all very well,” muttered Snap, despite Fiery’s warning glower. “But I’m not sure Beta’s going to give you much choice. . . .”

CHAPTER SIX

With the exception of Beta, thought Sweet, her new Pack had made her life a lot happier. She felt more content now than she had since the Big Growl had struck. Already, nearly a Moon-Dog's journey after joining the Pack, she'd been elevated by Alpha to be a hunter. There was nothing more satisfying than prowling the forest for prey, doing her part to provide for the Pack. Sunlight dappled the forest floor, there was warmth in the air, and Fiery was an able and friendly hunting partner.

"Now I smell that deer you saw," said the big dog. "We're closing on it. But I'm still not sure we can catch it."

"I think we can," Sweet told him confidently. "I'm faster than it is, and I know the forest better."

When she'd first caught sight of the creature, she could tell—even from a distance—that it was not at its strongest. Many animals were underfed and scrawny, in the aftermath of the Big Growl, but the deer would still provide a good meal for the Pack—if they could run it down.

"Deer are so easily spooked," Fiery pointed out, "and this one will be even warier. It doesn't belong in the forest, and

it’ll be on edge. No dog in this Pack has managed to catch one before.”

“We need to drive it into the denser trees,” advised Sweet. “Then it’ll have far less space to dodge.”

“Stop talking about it.” The derisive snarl came from behind them. “Just take the deer down, or find something else.”

Fiery paused to look over his shoulder. “Beta. I didn’t know you were joining us.”

“I’m not,” growled the red dog. “I want to see how Sweetie manages a hunt.”

Sweet ground her jaws together, hanging on to her temper. She knew Beta was waiting for her to fail at something—longing for it, in fact—and she’d gloat for days if Sweet failed to catch the deer now. The sneakiness of the red dog riled her so much, she could feel her muscles quiver beneath her skin—and that wouldn’t help her to keep cool and calm for the hunt.

Drawing herself up, Sweet ignored Beta and turned to Fiery. “Are you ready?”

Fiery inclined his massive head. “If you think we can do it.”

“I know we can.” Sweet could sense Beta almost twitching with irritation. The red dog had been furious, Sweet knew, when Alpha had promoted her to hunter. If they didn’t make this kill, she was certain that the tale of her failure would make its swift way to Alpha’s ears. Deep in her throat, Sweet growled softly. Failure was not an option now.

“Fiery, if you circle the edge of the forest there, you’ll force the deer toward me. Don’t rush it, all right? Just walk in step with it; don’t let it escape past you. I’ll do the rest.”

The big dog nodded. Without another word, to Sweet or to Beta, he padded off in a wide flanking movement. Crouching lower, watching silently, Sweet saw the deer’s head come up in alarm. Taking no more notice of Beta, Sweet began to lope carefully forward.

The deer was upwind of her, and it was focused on the huge shadow of Fiery, slipping through the tree trunks to its left. It sprang forward, then hesitated, doubled back, and began to trot deeper into the trees. Again it stopped, scanning the forest, but its only concern was the threat of Fiery.

Sweet moved smoothly and silently, a lean shadow, her long legs delicately finding the best path through the leafy undergrowth. Ahead of her the deer jerked to the side, uncertain now. Its eyes were huge.

Finally panicking, the deer leaped into a run, bolting across Sweet's path. But she was close enough now. As she sprinted to intercept it, it skidded to a halt, panicked into indecision. Sweet had only an instant, and she took it, springing and seizing the creature's throat, then hanging grimly on as Fiery plunged through the bushes to join her.

When the deer flopped limp beneath them, its kicking legs finally going still, Fiery drew back, panting. "We did it!"

"I told you we could," said Sweet quietly.

No need for noisy bragging, she thought with satisfaction. *I've proved myself to Fiery—and in front of Beta!*

Between them, she and Fiery hauled the deer's carcass back through the trees to the camp. It wasn't an easy job, thought Sweet, with her skinny legs and narrow jaws, but she had Fiery's powerful help even if she didn't have Beta's. *She disappeared fast*, thought Sweet bitterly, *when I made the kill and there was prey to drag*.

Beta continued to linger on the edges of the camp, glowering resentfully, while the rest of the Pack members gathered excitedly around the deer, barking and whining their pleasure. The dogs parted, though, when Alpha padded forward, sniffing appreciatively at the scent of dead prey.

“A fine catch.” The half wolf nodded, growling with approval. “The best this Pack’s ever had, in fact.” He shot his contemptuous yellow gaze at Beta, still lurking on the fringes of the group, and the red dog turned and slunk into the shadows.

Sweet expected Alpha to say something to her directly, but all he did was turn on his paw and saunter back toward his den. She furrowed her brow curiously. *What is Alpha playing at?*

She had no time to worry about it, though. Fiery was busily retelling the story of the deer over and over again, to any dog who would listen.

“I tell you, I’d never have thought of it,” he was saying to Snap. “Sweet was unbelievably fast. And smart!”

“I can’t believe you caught an actual deer!” a young dog called Dart butted in breathlessly.

“Catch the deer? It never had a chance!” guffawed Fiery. “Not with Sweet on its tail.”

“We’ll have deer every day!” yelped another youngster, Twitch. “We’ll never be hungry again!”

“You’ll get even fatter,” teased his sister, Spring.

Alpha stuck his head out of his den at that, glaring at the younger dogs. “It’s a fine catch, and I said so,” he growled, quieting every dog with his stare. “But don’t get too comfortable. There won’t always be stray deer in the forest, and even Sweet might not be able to catch them *all* the time.”

He gave Sweet a cool glance that she couldn’t quite read. What was that in the Alpha’s yellow eyes, she wondered . . . a *challenge?* Was he trying to goad her into catching prey like that every day? Did he think she was that desperate to impress him? Sweet looked away, her fur prickling with irritation.

“How did you get to be so fast?” Spring yelped at her side.

“Yes, tell us about swift-dogs,” added Dart. “How come your legs are so long and thin?”

Distracted from her annoyance with Alpha, Sweet laughed. “All right, I’ll tell you where the swift-dogs came from.”

Dart and Spring sat expectantly on their haunches while a few more of the Pack members gathered around. “Go on, then,” said Snap, cocking an ear. “I want to hear this too.”

“You’ve heard of the Fastest Hare?” asked Sweet, looking from dog to dog as more of the Pack sat down. “He was the worst trickster in the world. He was always playing jokes on the Spirit Dogs, and making them look like fools, and they grew very angry with him. Hares were made for dogs to chase, and no hare should get away with such insolence!

“Well, one day the Alpha of the Wind-Dogs was running through the golden meadow of the sky, and beneath her she saw the Fastest Hare keeping pace with her. As she watched him in surprise, he looked up at her and winked his yellow eye, and smirked. And then he sped up, till he was running so fast he outpaced even the Wind-Dog.

“The Alpha Wind-Dog was enraged. She went to the Sky-Dogs and demanded the Hare be punished for his impudence. So the Sky-Dogs and Wind-Dogs leaped down to the earth and surrounded the Hare, and demanded he put an end to his tricks. But the Hare just laughed at them, and ran between their legs, teasing them. ‘I’m the Fastest Hare,’ he laughed, ‘and there’s nothing you can do. My legs are the longest legs of all the animals, and I’m thin and narrow and I cut through the air. No one can catch me!’

“Then the Alpha Wind-Dog said, ‘Sky-Dogs! You’ve seen for yourselves how the Hare taunts me! Give me legs that are longer than the Hare’s. Give me and all my children the longest legs, and make us thin and narrow so that we cut through the air even faster than that trickster!’

“The Sky-Dogs knew that as long as the Hare had the longest legs, he would never give them the proper respect. So they agreed to the Alpha Wind-Dog’s request. They made her legs longer than the Hare’s, and they made her body

even thinner and narrower than his. And the next time the Hare challenged the Wind-Dog, she ran him down! She pounced, and held him in her jaws and said, ‘Now you must run from me and from all my children, because we will never stop till we catch you.’

“And the Fastest Hare realized he was beaten. He begged the Alpha Wind-Dog’s mercy and was humbled. From that day on, all of his children had to run from the family of the Wind-Dogs.”

Sweet sat back happily, her tongue lolling, and basked in the admiring stares of the other Pack members.

“Wow,” said Spring. “I haven’t heard that story before.”

“You haven’t heard it,” sneered a familiar voice, “because Sweetie made it up. There’re no such Spirit Dogs as the Wind-Dogs! I’ve never heard such nonsense.”

Sweet stared coolly at Beta as the red dog slunk into the circle. For once, her belly didn’t twist with anger. *You can’t provoke me now, Beta*, she thought, *any more than the Fastest Hare can taunt the Alpha Wind-Dog. I’m part of this Pack, and these dogs know it*.

Contented, she glanced around at the others, waiting for one of them to speak up, to confirm the truth of her story.

But all her Packmates did was exchange nervous glances, or stare at the forest floor. Sweet’s eyes widened as the silence stretched. She shot a look at Fiery, but even he was avoiding her eyes. He licked a paw, and made a rumbling sound in his throat, and scratched his ear.

Sweet felt as if there was a stone in her belly. *It’s this Pack*, she realized. *This Pack, and its rigid rules. They’ll complain about how mean Beta is, but only in private. They’ll never contradict her, or tell her she’s wrong. . . .*

With a heavy heart, Sweet lay down and stretched out her forepaws, pretending nonchalance, but her mind was in turmoil.

Did I make the wrong decision, joining this Pack? Was all the effort worth it?

But what was the alternative?
To be all alone in a changed, broken, empty world . . .

CHAPTER SEVEN

Sweet had too much time the next morning to gnaw at her worries, turning them over and over in her skull. She'd been detailed to the sunup corner of the camp and told to keep watch for a group of strange dogs, strays that had been scented but never fully seen. Alpha was so concerned, he'd told the hunters to join the patrol dogs for now, making sure the camp was fully guarded.

"We have to be particularly vigilant," Alpha had told her. "I'm relying on you, Sweet."

And she had kept a close watch on every shadow and every movement in the forest, but that didn't provide enough distraction from her worries about her place in the Pack. *Will I ever really fit in here? It's so different from my swift-dog Pack. What was that sound—a snapping twig? I wonder if Beta will ever soften her opinion of me. . . .*

A high, agonized howl shattered Sweet's thoughts, sending her leaping to her paws. Despite the awfulness of the sound, she recognized the voice.

Moon!

Fiery’s mate must be about to give birth to her pups, Sweet realized as she raced back to the camp. *But something must be wrong for her to cry out like that—*

Sure enough, when Sweet broke out of the trees, she saw Moon lying on her flank, legs stiff and twitching, her muzzle twisted in pain. Other dogs were milling around her, looking worried, but scared to go closer.

Sweet pushed through their bodies. “Somebody has to get Fiery!” she barked.

“He’s out on patrol,” growled Spring nervously. “Hold on, Moon! It’ll be over soon.”

“He’ll want to be here, especially when Moon’s in pain,” said Sweet urgently.

“Well, you’re the fastest,” Twitch pointed out. He had a lame leg himself—it had been like that since he was a pup—and he nudged it now with his muzzle, as if to point out the hopelessness of sending him.

“But I’m on guard!” Sweet looked desperately at the other dogs as Moon gave a series of yips, full of pain.

To her surprise, Beta trotted to her side. “I’ll cover your area,” she growled. “Twitch is right, you’ll get to Fiery quickest. Go on, I’ll take your place.”

Sweet had no time to express her shock—or her gratitude. Beta’s words made all her worries crumble away like a sandbank in a drought. If the red dog could put aside their differences for the good of all dogs, it seemed this was a true Pack after all. Sweet gave Beta a brief relieved nod, turned, and bolted out of the clearing.

Fiery’s scent was not hard to pick up; when Sweet followed the usual patrol trail, she caught his odor in her nostrils straightaway. He’d been here only minutes before, she realized, leaping a fallen log and darting on. Through the next line of trees lay a broad meadow, and in the full light of the morning sun she could make out the shapes of the patrol on the low horizon. Sweet raced to catch up.

“Fiery!” she barked, her tongue lolling as she panted. “Fiery!”

The lead patrol dog turned. He must have realized it was important, because he turned and trotted rapidly back toward Sweet, and she slithered to a stop on the meadow grass, gasping.

“Moon’s pup-time has come. She needs you!”

He barely hesitated. “Thank you,” he growled, then bounded off toward the forest, astonishingly fleet for such a huge dog. Sweet followed at his heels while the rest of the patrol stared after them.

Sweet caught up with Fiery as they reached the edge of the trees, though it struck her that few other dogs would have been able to match his desperate speed. She let him lead the way through the undergrowth, his bulk smashing twigs and leafy branches aside, and it seemed only moments until they reached the camp’s border.

Sweet trotted to a halt, stiff-legged and shocked. Fiery stalked forward more slowly now, snarling.

Snap stood there, her back to the camp and her muzzle peeled back, facing down a pair of hungry coyotes.

“What . . . ? How in the name of the Earth-Dog did they get in?” barked Fiery, as the coyotes twisted to face the new threat.

Sweet’s heart lurched. This was the section of the camp border she’d been guarding!

Fiery clearly had no time for fighting coyotes. He gave a deep, baying howl of anger, and the scrawny creatures, seeing instantly that they were outnumbered, panicked. Slipping and slithering, they almost fell over themselves as they fled the camp.

Fiery didn’t give chase, but plunged straight on toward his and Moon’s den, where the yaps and howls of pain were still high and frantic. Snap rounded on Sweet.

“Where were you?” she barked.

Sweet licked her chops, confused and afraid. “I—I had to fetch Fiery! I thought Beta was patrolling this area! She said—she told me she’d cover for me.” Her ears drooped as her breathing calmed at last. “Something must have happened. She must have been called away, Snap. I—”

“Oh, don’t worry,” grunted Snap through clenched jaws. She was still getting her own breath back after the panic. “No harm done, in the end. Just as well I was here, though. With Alpha away on patrol, and everyone distracted by Moon’s pup-time.”

“How is she?” begged Sweet, craning her head to peer toward the noise from Moon’s den.

“I don’t know.” Snap glanced grimly over her shoulder. “There’s obviously a problem. She was in pain, and—ah!”

The sudden quietness was oppressive. Snap and Sweet stared at each other, and Sweet knew the hunt-dog felt the same sudden, awful fear as she did.

Then Fiery broke the silence with a howl of joy. His deep voice was joined by Moon’s, feebler, but filled with relief and happiness.

Snap’s ears pricked up. “The pups. They’re born!”

She turned, and she and Sweet bounded toward the den together. As they reached it, Fiery was just emerging, the strain on his blunt face still visible through the pride and pleasure.

“Three fine pups,” he announced gruffly. “Two males and a female!”

“Congratulations.”

The drawling voice made every dog turn, as Alpha padded toward the den, his ears pricked in mild curiosity.

“Thank you, Alpha,” Fiery dipped his head respectfully, but his tail still wagged with irrepressible happiness.

“Three fine pups? That’s good news for the Pack.” That seemed to be the extent of Alpha’s interest, though, because he turned to Sweet and Snap, his face becoming grim. “You two, and Beta . . . come with me.”

Her stomach heavy with foreboding, Sweet followed him, together with Snap and Beta. A rabbit-chase from the other dogs, Alpha turned and sat on his haunches, then stared at them each in turn.

“How did coyotes get into this camp?” he asked. His tone was too quiet, too calm.

Sweet opened her jaws to explain, but again Beta was too fast for her. “They got in from that direction,” said the red dog, jerking her muzzle toward Sweet’s patrol zone. “*She* was supposed to be guarding that spot, I think?”

“I went to find Fiery!” Sweet looked desperately from Beta’s sly face to Alpha’s. “We all—the dogs who were here agreed that Moon needed her mate. I was the fastest!”

“That’s no reason to abandon your post!” snapped Alpha.

“But I didn’t! Beta said she’d cover for me!”

“Liar.” Beta’s low snarl made Sweet’s blood run cold. “I haven’t seen you all day.”

Sweet opened her jaws, but no sound would come out. Of course, if Beta had been lured away somehow—if she’d been distracted enough to allow the coyotes to breach their boundaries—she would want to play down her own mistake. But did she have to lie and blame everything on Sweet? Sweet’s nerves prickled with fear and disbelief.

They’ll think I ran away—again. . . . It’s happening again! I’m the Dog Who Ran Away. . . .

“But I didn’t!” she barked out loud in panic. “I didn’t run away!”

“You two.” Alpha glared at Snap and Beta. “Leave us.”

Snap shot Sweet a sympathetic look, but Beta’s eyes were cunning and vindictive as she slunk away. Sweet swallowed hard as their pawsteps faded into the trees. Then she turned, skin quivering, to face Alpha. His stern yellow stare was unnerving.

“You’re putting me in a very difficult position, Sweet,” he growled softly. “Making these puppish errors.”

“I’m sorry, Alpha. I misunderstood. I thought that Beta—”

“You’re just getting used to Wild Pack life. . . .” He interrupted as if she hadn’t spoken. “So I have to make allowances. I won’t punish you as you should be punished. Not this time.”

Sweet dipped her head. It was probably best to keep silent, she decided, though confusion and anger stirred in her gut.

“Next time, you’ll find I’m not so understanding,” he growled silkily. “Tonight you’ll be on watch from dusk till sunup; I don’t care how tired you are. You *will* protect this Pack throughout the no-sun hours. Perhaps that will teach you Pack discipline.”

Sweet watched the half wolf as he stalked away toward his den. A sense of injustice roiled in her belly, but there was something else, too.

She knew Alpha expected her to be grateful for his mercy, but she wasn’t. All she felt was resentment, and a deep, gnawing suspicion.

The half wolf was up to something; she knew it.

In the darkness of the wild wood, later that night, Sweet lay with her head on her paws and gazed up at the Moon-Dog. Her huge eye was full and bright in the sky again, reminding Sweet that she’d been with this Pack now for a full Moon-Dog journey.

And now, for the first Great Howl since she’d joined them, she was exiled to the camp’s edges, her punishment for letting those coyotes sneak in. Through the trees she could hear the first voices rise, then others as they joined in harmony. The Howl swelled and rose, making the night air quiver, and raising Sweet’s fur at the roots.

It felt strange. Despite her isolation out here, she didn’t feel lonely, as she had when as an outsider she’d first heard their distant howling. Even though she wasn’t with them right now, she felt the connection in her bones and her

blood: a living, thrilling link to her Pack, and this forest, and the wounded earth they walked on.

The wounded earth that never howled, that clenched its fangs against the pain it must feel at being torn apart . . .

Sitting up, Sweet tilted her head back. Unable to repress it, she let the howl grow in her belly and her throat, swelling until the cry of emotion escaped her. Even if she wasn't among them, she could howl with her Pack, she could join her voice and her whole being to theirs.

The sensation of belonging filled Sweet as if it was a second stream of blood in her veins. With that knowledge came a deep feeling of peace. Beta couldn't touch that, not deep down; and even Alpha couldn't affect it with his tricks and manipulations. Her connection was with the Pack and its spirit, and only she could break it.

And I'd never want to. After all the times she'd run away—from the Trap House, from Lucky, from her first swift-dog Pack—she found suddenly that the urge to run was gone.

This was where she belonged—this land, this forest, this Pack.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The high of the Great Howl couldn’t last forever, and Sweet was exhausted and aching from her long watch by the time the sky began to pale where the Sun-Dog would rise. Her leg muscles ached from the fast sprint to find Fiery, and her mind felt stunned by the Howl itself, but its message had lodged firmly inside her heart and guts. She wouldn’t let her Pack down now. She’d defend their home against anything.

If she truly had abandoned her post, she mused, she’d have earned this punishment, and worse. She still wondered if perhaps Alpha knew more about that than he was letting on. Did he in fact know why no dog was there to stop the coyotes? Did he know what had really happened? And if so, why had he gone through with this?

She didn’t trust the half wolf, Sweet admitted inwardly. *But I’m not at all sure why. . . .*

A branch cracked behind her, and she leaped to her feet, hackles high; but instantly she recognized the two dogs. Fiery was unmistakable, with his square head and his massive body, and Moon’s white-and-black coat gleamed in the early dawn. The new mother dog leaned weakly against

her mate's flank, but as they drew closer to Sweet she left Fiery's side to lick Sweet's ear and nuzzle her neck.

"Thank you for what you did, Sweet," murmured Moon. "I'm so sorry it got you into trouble. But Fiery came to me in time to see the last of his pups born. I don't know if I'd have had the strength, otherwise."

"I can't thank you enough," rumbled Fiery. The sire-pride in his eyes looked as if it would never dim. "Our pups don't have names yet, but one day soon they will—and I hope they grow up to be as loyal and brave as you, Sweet."

The two dogs' words made Sweet's gut twist and her heart warm with gratitude. She returned their fond licks. "Thank you. Both of you. I'm only glad I could help."

"You helped more than we can say," Moon told her. "And you didn't deserve this punishment. We both know you'd never have left your post and abandoned the camp." She took a breath, as if to say more, then shut her jaws.

"We have to go back to the pups," said Fiery softly, nuzzling his mate. "But remember what we owe you, Sweet. Because *we* won't forget."

Sweet watched them go, vanishing into the shadows. The warmth inside her was kindling to a fierce glow of protectiveness.

No. I'll never let my friends down again.

Just as the Sun-Dog was rising, his light glinting fiercely through the trees, Fiery returned, relieving Sweet of her watch and telling her kindly but firmly to get some sleep. Gratefully Sweet accepted, slinking exhaustedly back into the camp. Her eyes and ears drooped and her paws felt like boulders, but it seemed she wasn't to get any sleep just yet. Alpha was summoning the Pack into the clearing, his tail tapping impatiently on the rock where he sat.

As he caught sight of her approaching, he gave a low bark, and every dog turned, pricking their ears.

“Hear this, dogs of my Pack. Sweet’s punishment is over. She is forgiven her error and she will rejoin the hunting dogs today.”

Just behind him there was a low snarl, and Alpha half turned. Beta stood there, her muscles trembling with anger and her hackles bristling.

Alpha said nothing. He kept his yellow stare level on Beta till she was forced to meet it. The red dog’s tail lowered, and she fell silent.

“That’s settled, then,” growled Alpha. “Every dog, go to your duties. Sweet, get some sleep. You’ll need it before you hunt.”

Without the refreshment of a brief sleep, Sweet didn’t think she’d have managed to catch any prey at all. The hunt that day was long and hard, and as she returned to her den afterward, she felt hunger gnaw at her belly; the sting of it reminded her that she hadn’t eaten anything since before her long night’s guard duty. But the ache in her muscles was a good one. She was a part of the team again, a good and hardworking dog, a valuable member of the Pack.

She stopped at the entrance to her den and sniffed. *Food?*

Happiness made her light-headed. Fiery and Moon had left her a rabbit from the Pack’s earlier meal. *It’s good to have a Pack*, she thought. *It’s good to have friends*.

She could barely even wait to give thanks to the Forest-Dog. Falling on the rabbit, she pinned it with her forepaws and began to tear at it, gulping chunks of it down. The feeling of warm food in her empty belly was bliss, chasing away all the fears and worries and sadness of the night before. For long, ravenous moments, Sweet didn’t even see the shadow that fell across her.

Only when Beta’s howl rang out above her did she jerk her head up, startled.

“Sweet has eaten the common prey! She has deprived the Pack and its pups, and filled her own belly!”

Sweet stared up at the red dog, her jaw loose, dizzy for an instant with disbelief and bewilderment. *What?*

Then, as she caught the vicious glint in Beta’s eyes, she realized. *Beta left this rabbit here! It was Beta!*

Sweet shuffled hastily back from the torn prey, but she knew it was too late. Her mouth was bloody and stained, and still full of rabbit meat.

She could only crouch, trembling, on the ground as Alpha stalked toward her, followed by her Packmates. The taste of the meat in her jaws was like acrid dust; she couldn’t even swallow it.

“Sweet.” Alpha’s bark was thunderous. “This is the worst offense a Pack member can commit.”

“Alpha, I—” Her whine was so hoarse, she could barely hear it herself.

“If you really did this, Sweet,” Alpha growled, “you will be scarred both as punishment and as a sign to every dog of what you are. What do you have to say for yourself? How do you respond to Beta’s charge?”

The half wolf’s yellow eyes were entirely unreadable. Sweet stared into them, transfixed with horror, searching for a trace of pity, or a trace of doubt.

I won’t be scarred for something I didn’t do. I will not let it happen!

But how can I stop it? I have no witnesses to speak for me! Beta planned this, she planned it perfectly from the start. . . .

She could spring to her paws right now, she thought, turn and run. No dog here could catch her if she was determined. She was the fastest of all of them.

But then she could never come back. *Never*. Finally tearing her eyes away from Alpha’s, she met Fiery’s steady clear gaze.

Fiery wants me to deny it. He wants me to prove myself—he wants to know he and Moon were right to trust me. . . .

Something churned in Sweet's belly, and a spark of fire flared in her heart.

I will not be the Dog Who Runs. Not this time. I will be the Dog Who Stands Her Ground.

Sweet raised herself to her paws. She stood foursquare, her legs so rigid she was afraid they would tremble. But she gazed once more, this time with defiance, into Alpha's eyes.

"Alpha. Dogs of my Pack," she barked, and her voice rang out clear and strong. "I reject Beta's charge. She is lying. I will prove myself, here and now, in combat."

She turned to the red dog, and gazed at her icily.

"*I challenge Beta*."

CHAPTER NINE

The air in the camp crackled with tension, lifting the roots of Sweet's fur. Dogs were drawing back into a wide circle, their eyes wide and their ears pricked in nervous expectation. There were small whines of anxiety, and a few excited growls of anticipation, quickly stifled.

Sweet kept her eyes on Beta, who stood rigid, as if in shock. The red dog's jaws were slightly parted, but as Sweet watched, she recovered, and her lips stretched in a sneer over her sharp fangs.

At Sweet's side, Moon murmured, "Is this what you wanted all along, Sweet? To challenge Beta and become Alpha's second in command?"

Sweet cocked one ear at her friend. "Of course not. That has nothing to do with this." She frowned. "I'm tired of putting up with her, that's all. Taunting me, playing tricks. The Wind-Dogs wouldn't put up with it from the Hare. If I tolerated it from Beta, I'd be letting down Alpha Wind-Dog herself!" A fierce thrill of determination went down Sweet's spine as she said it. *Wind-Dogs*, she thought, *be with me! Give me the speed I need!*

“Hear me, dogs of my Pack,” barked Alpha. “Sweet the swift-dog challenges Beta.” He glanced around them all, then stepped back and nodded to the two challengers.

“Be careful, Sweet,” Moon whispered, licking her ear. “Beta is a good and clever fighter. And she’s ruthless.”

“I know she is.” Sweet nodded calmly. “But I can either stand up to her, or I can run. And I won’t be the Dog Who Runs, not anymore. I’ve tried that, and I always regret it. Now, I’m going to be the Dog Who Stands.”

“You’ll stand,” snarled Beta, “till I grind you into the dust.” She flung herself at Sweet, fangs snapping, claws lashing.

Sweet whirled, ducked, and flew beneath Beta’s charging body. If Beta had hoped to catch her off guard with a single violent charge, thought Sweet, she was wrong. She twisted, raking her claws at Beta’s underbelly as the red dog tumbled and rolled off-balance.

Sweet missed, but Beta had not laid a claw on her, either. Furious, Beta sprang back to her paws and charged again. This time Sweet’s haunches were bunched beneath her and she propelled herself upward so that Beta skidded in the dust, missing again. But Beta was fast, too, and one of her flailing paws caught Sweet’s flank, drawing blood.

Sweet scrabbled to a stop, turning quickly to face her enemy. She could feel blood beading on her flank, and the warm trickle as it began to flow. She clenched her jaws.

“You’re pathetic, Bony Dog,” snarled Beta.

Sweet resisted the temptation to return insult for insult. She was faster than Beta, but she was going to need all her breath and all her wits to stay out of reach of those savage claws. She dodged sideways again as Beta lunged, feeling sharp teeth graze her leg, but she’d escaped once more without a deep wound. As Beta stumbled, Sweet snapped her long muzzle at the red dog’s hind leg. Her jaws closed satisfyingly on flesh and bone, and Beta yelped. Sweet released her, and sprang back out of reach.

Both dogs stood rigid, eyeing each other, panting hard. Around them there was silence from the rest of the Pack; Sweet didn't hear so much as a whine or a quiet yelp.

Beta began to circle again, and Sweet turned slowly, watching her.

This time, Beta's attack was still powerful, but she took more care, and Sweet darted forward to meet her, teeth bared. Beta dodged her bite, and swiped her claws at Sweet's eyes, one claw nicking her cheekbone. Sweet gave a yelp of anger.

She's fighting like Callie used to. Aiming for my eyes! She doesn't care if she blinds me—she'd rather kill me than see me part of this Pack!

The realization sent new strength and determination flowing into Sweet's blood. *This is one fight I won't lose*.

Beta's moves were slyer now, more considered, but Sweet could see the red light of fury in her blazing eyes. *She's not in complete control of herself. If I can tempt her in closer —*

Sweet bounded forward, head twisting as if to bite. Beta lunged for her eyes again, but this time Sweet ducked and rolled. Beta's forepaw slammed into the dust beside her head, and Sweet took her chance. She snapped for the red dog's foreleg, seizing it between her jaws and crunching down hard. Through the pounding of blood in her ears, she heard Beta's screaming howl of pain.

I can't give her a single chance. Sweet twisted up onto her forepaws, Beta's leg still clamped in her teeth, and yanked hard. Her teeth tore into the flesh, and against the soft inside of her mouth she felt something strain and snap in her enemy's leg muscles.

Beta's howl turned into a shrieking yelp. Her big body collapsed sideways, thumping into the dust. Sweet flung herself on top of the red dog, releasing her leg and grabbing a tight hold on her neck.

"Yield!" she snarled through a mouthful of fur and flesh. "*Yield!*"

Beta was squirming and wriggling and whining with fury beneath her, but Sweet had her pinned. At last, flanks heaving, the red dog went limp, her teeth still bared in a snarl.

"I . . . I *yield*."

Sweet left her teeth in Beta's scruff a moment longer, to make certain, then abruptly released her. She scrambled off the red dog's sprawled body, letting her stagger to her paws and stand there, panting with defeated fury.

Sweet lifted her head high. "You made me out to be a thief, Beta. You called me a food-stealer and a deserter in front of my Pack." Her fangs clenched. "You lied."

Beta's tail was low and her head hung down, but her face still wore its hateful snarl.

"You lied, Beta," barked Sweet in her face. "Say it!"

"I lied," growled Beta, "to rid our Pack of a useless lightweight."

Sweet's muzzle curled, but she didn't respond. She didn't have to. All around, other dogs were muttering, growling, barking out the things they hadn't dared say before.

"Beta did lie. I never believed Sweet would steal," whined Twitch.

"Not after she carried that rabbit all the way here," barked Spring in agreement.

"Beta's sneaky that way," growled Snap. "I always said you couldn't trust her."

Fiery gave Snap a sidelong frown of disapproval, but he said, "You can trust Sweet."

"Yes," said Moon, coming forward to lick the swift-dog's ear. "Sweet has always been a good dog. She's an asset to this Pack."

Sweet glanced at Beta. She almost felt sorry for her, but she couldn't afford to give in to pity. Beta had pushed and pushed till Sweet had had no choice, and Sweet knew that she couldn't show weakness now. That was the world after

the Big Growl: it was about survival. And she would survive. She knew now that she had the strength.

Beta curled her muzzle as she regained her breath and her dignity. “Enjoy your victory, Sweet.” She didn’t call her *Sweetie* now, thought Sweet with satisfaction. “But you just wait. I’ll challenge you again, swift-dog. I’ll challenge you on a day when I’m not tired from hunting, and I’ll take back my rightful place in this Pack.”

“No,” came a silky voice. “No, you won’t.”

Alpha paced forward as dogs gave way before him, drawing back, every eye riveted on him. He stalked right up to Beta, till his nose was almost touching hers. Silence fell among the other Pack members.

“You lost this challenge, Beta,” he growled. “Not that *Beta* is your name anymore. But you lost more than a fight, and you know it. You’ve been exposed as a liar and a traitor, and this Pack has no room for dishonorable dogs. Leave now.”

Beta looked stunned. Her jaws parted. At last she stammered, “But, Alpha—”

“Leave,” he snarled. “Leave now, *Packless dog*, while you still can.”

There was no mistaking the threat in his voice. Beta could only stare at him, her face stricken. She took a pace backward, glancing to left and right, and her gaze fell on Sweet.

The hatred there was piercing, but at least it was fleeting. With a heartbroken whine, Beta turned and limped away into the forest.

Sweet shook off the tremor that rippled through her skin. *I can’t help thinking I haven’t seen the last of her. . . .*

For now, though, life with the Pack promised to be a lot more peaceful, she thought with relief. The Pack was dispersing, and dogs were murmuring and gossiping about the unexpected turn of events. Only Alpha still stood there, watching her with his head slightly cocked.

“Well, Sweet,” he growled. “Are you ready for this? You are Beta of this Pack now.”

Sweet raised her head, slightly shocked. “Alpha, that’s not why I fought her. I know that’s the rule, but I never really wanted—I mean, I only wanted to challenge her lies, stop her bullying me . . .”

The half wolf hunched his shoulders, looking amused. “Whether you meant it or not, Sweet, you can’t break Pack rules. You defeated our Beta in a lawful challenge.”

Sweet stared at him, her jaws slightly parted. It made sense, and Moon had warned her, but it really hadn’t crossed her mind when she issued her challenge to the red dog. *Maybe*, she thought, *I didn’t quite think this through. . . .*

The light in Alpha’s eyes was somewhere between mirth and menace.

“You’d better get used to it, swift-dog. You are now the Beta of this Pack.”

CHAPTER TEN

How in the name of the Earth-Dog, thought Sweet, could I ever have hesitated? How could I have thought I wouldn't get used to being Beta?

She bounded ahead to where Spring and Dart were tugging at a deer's leg, straining to drag it back to camp. Still gripping with their teeth, they both looked up at her, cocking their ears, waiting for her orders.

"Pull to the left, there," she barked encouragingly. "There's a tussock, see? The haunches are getting caught on it. You'll have to drag it around." She seized the deer's neck in her own jaws and began to tug on it, showing them the way. Both the other dogs squatted back on their haunches, using the leverage to drag the deer's body farther.

"Thanks for coming out here to help us, Beta." Dart let go of the deer for a moment, panting. "This prey's awkward, to say the least."

"But you brought it down," Sweet pointed out encouragingly.

Dart’s jaws broadened in a grin. “Yes. I never thought we’d manage one, but your training tips were exactly right. We don’t all have to be fast, so long as we have enough hunters to drive it.”

“Even Twitch contributed,” said Spring, sounding proud of her litter-brother. “That leg holds him back, but he followed your advice and stayed out to the flank. If he hadn’t been in position, the deer would have gotten away.”

Sweet felt warm with pleasure and satisfaction. “I’m glad the training paid off,” she said.

“We’re going to do some more sparring this evening, before prey-sharing, aren’t we?” Dart twitched an ear hopefully. “I’d like to learn some of your speed-tricks for a fight.”

“I need to organize tomorrow’s patrols,” said Sweet cautiously. “Moon’s still excused from hunting duty because of her pups, so we’re shortpawed. But after that, why not?” She gave Dart’s ear an affectionate flick of her tongue. “I’ve learned a lot from the Pack, so if there’s anything I can teach you back, I’m happy.”

“I love learning new fighting skills,” said Dart. “It’s been a long time since the Pack freshened up our tactics. You know Alpha, he does nothing about that or hunting practice, just skulks in his den all—”

“*Dart*,” growled Spring warningly.

Sweet shot her a dry look—Spring was one of the dogs who’d had her ears nipped by Fiery for bad-mouthing the old Beta—but on this occasion the young dog was right. Dart really shouldn’t show disrespect to Alpha. It was true that he took little part in organizing patrols, or training the younger dogs, but that was fine by Sweet. She enjoyed being Beta more than she’d ever expected, and she was happy to take on the half wolf’s share of the practical work. After all, she was rewarded with the second-best choice of prey at the end of the day, and she never went hungry or grew thin from hard work. And in her more fanciful moments, she

could imagine she was in charge of the whole Pack herself—that *she* was Alpha.

I should have stood up to the old Beta sooner, she thought ruefully. *For that matter, I should have faced down Callie long ago, in the days when I was still in my old Pack. She'd probably have respected me more if I had*.

And I'm good at this, better than I ever knew. If I'd been Beta of the swift-dog Pack, maybe we would never have been caught by the longpaws. Maybe then so many of us wouldn't have died in that terrible Trap House. . . .

The dogs had dragged the deer almost to the edge of the camp by now, and Sweet was distracted from her regrets when a small squirming body bumped into her paw. A tiny pup, its eyes still blurry, had escaped from Moon's den and was wobbling its way into the outside world.

"You're an adventurous one." Laughing, Sweet left Dart and Spring to haul the deer by themselves to the prey pile. She picked up the tiny pup gently in her mouth and carried it back to Moon, ignoring its protesting squeaks.

Moon appeared at the entrance to the den, her face anxious, but when she caught sight of Sweet, her jaws relaxed and she let her tongue loll. She sat down and woofed gently to her pup.

"Oh, Squirm! You're such a wanderer already, little one!"

Sweet set the tiny pup down. As soon as he smelled his mother, he blundered under her body and nestled there, clearly deciding adventure could wait till he was a few hours older.

"Another good hunt, Sweet?" Moon nuzzled her shoulder. "The Pack's been well-fed this last Moon-Dog journey. I think you've brought us good luck."

"I hope so. I owe you all so much." Sweet returned Moon's affectionate lick. "The pups are looking healthy!"

"They're already getting too lively—oh!" Moon snapped her head around to stare, and Sweet stiffened, her hackles springing erect.

The peace of the evening and the relaxed mood were shattered as Snap bounded into the clearing, her volley of barks sharp and urgent.

“Dogs! Dogs are approaching. A strange Pack! In our territory!”

Now Sweet saw why Alpha was the head of the Pack. He sprang out of his den, leaped up to his favorite boulder and let loose a deep, barking howl of summons.

“Packmates! Our territory is threatened by strangers. Prepare for battle!”

Instantly Snap, Spring, Dart, Twitch, and Fiery bounded to his side, tails high and ears pricked keenly forward. Alpha barked out orders, fast and confident, and in moments he was tearing into the woods, his loyal followers at his heels.

Filled with true admiration for her leader for the first time, Sweet paused only for a moment. After checking over the camp to make sure Moon and her pups were safe and well defended, she left them with a reassuring bark, and followed the rest of the fighting party.

I’ve never been in a real battle before, she thought. *Only food-fights with other Packs, and the fight with the longpaws—and I ran away from that*.

Well, Sweet wasn’t running from this battle. She was actually running toward it—and not only was she determined, she felt a thrill of real excitement in her skin and blood and nerves. She was the Beta of a powerful Wild Pack, and she was running to confront its enemies.

The others were just ahead of her now, racing up a dry streambed, leaping from rock to flat rock, with Alpha in the lead. Sweet bounded forward to lope alongside at his flank, her muscles tingling with pride. Alpha slowed as he reached a ridge, then turned and ran along below the skyline till he reached a tumble of sandstone boulders. He trotted silently among them and halted, glaring down into the shallow valley below.

At his side, Sweet panted quietly as she watched the ragtag bunch of dogs who were trotting down the valley. She narrowed her eyes in surprise.

It was the oddest Pack she'd ever seen. There was a black, shaggy dog who was massive, but did not look particularly fierce. At her side were two stocky little dogs, one with a snub nose, and one with a pointed face. There was a black-and-white farm dog who kept retracing his steps and herding the others, fussing over them and trying to keep them together. There was a yellow-coated dog who reminded Sweet, a little painfully, of Lucky the City Dog—but this was a female, her fur sleeker and shorter, and she didn't move with Lucky's strutting, jaunty confidence. The last was an extraordinary-looking animal, and for a moment Sweet wasn't sure it was a dog at all. It looked like a trailing bundle of white moss, except that it had tiny eyes in front, and a black button-nose. It gave a pathetic little yelp as a strand of its fur caught on a branch.

A low growl was building in Alpha's throat, and Sweet shook herself. No matter how bizarre this Pack of mutts looked, they were still intruders. And they must be more dangerous than they looked—because why else would they trot so confidently into the territory of a half wolf like Alpha?

"Take them down," snarled Alpha.

Sweet gave him a nod, then growled low in her throat to summon the others into their fighting positions.

"Ready?" she snarled. "Let's teach these mutts to stay out of our Pack-lands."

The others growled their angry agreement, and Sweet bounded forward, racing down the hill. The intruder dogs didn't even notice them at first, and when their heads at last came up, there was nothing but stupid shock on their blank faces.

Alpha was behind her. "Draw blood," he howled. "Drive them away!"

Sweet hurtled into battle, knocking one of the small dogs off its paws and sending it tumbling, stunned and winded. But even as she spun to snap at another, something caught the corner of her vision.

There was something in the trees, higher up the valley.

She paused, just for a moment, her fangs still bared. Was she seeing things?

Probably.

Sweet lashed out with her claws, focusing on the fight, but the strange dogs were already spinning, panicked, trying to flee.

She glanced up the valley's slope once more. Because she was sure, now, that she hadn't imagined it.

That flash of movement—it had been no lazy, street-dog strut. It was an animal, charging from between the trees, strong legs pounding in desperation.

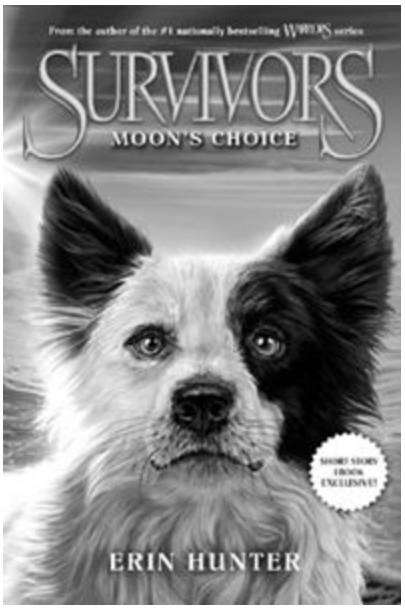
And the Sun-Dog's light gleamed on shaggy, golden fur.

. . .

EXCERPT FROM *SURVIVORS: MOON'S CHOICE*

KEEP READING
FOR A SNEAK PEEK AT

SURVIVORS
MOON'S CHOICE



CHAPTER ONE

A soft blue-gray mist hung on the horizon, but the sky above the young dog was clear as it dimmed toward night. Moon watched her namesake Spirit Dog stretch and lope into view. The Moon-Dog was half in shadow, but still she shone bright enough to make a dog mistake the dusk for daylight. A whine of anticipation rose in Moon's throat as she gazed up at her.

Just now the Pack members were going about their last duties of the day: Snap and Mulch were checking the border where a protective thornbush had blown down in the last storm; Whine, the little Omega, was trotting from den to den, renewing the bedding of the more senior dogs. Night had almost fallen, and soon the hunt patrol would return to camp, and the Pack would eat together. Then there might be time to lie contentedly, with a full belly, and talk about the day with her Mother-Dog and Father-Dog.

Moon could hear the two of them behind her in the den, discussing some serious issue about Pack life in low voices. Moon knew that as Alpha and Beta of the Pack, her parent-

dogs' duties came first; it would be the same for her, when her time came to be Pack leader. She had to be patient.

She had to be more patient than Star anyway, she thought, with a roll of her blue eyes. Her litter-sister kept bounding up to her, backing off, thrashing her tail, and snapping playfully. She was desperate to entice Moon into a fight-game, but Moon was having none of it. Fight-games were for pups!

"Star, settle down!" she yipped, swiping a gentle paw at her litter-sister's ear.

Star rolled over, pawing the air, snapping at a moth. "Oh, Moon, have some fun while you still can. You won't have any time to play at *all* once you're Alpha!"

"We're both too old to be playing," Moon told her firmly.

Star scrabbled back upright, sat down, and scratched at one ear. "You're no fun anymore," she said, an edge in her voice.

Moon pinned her ears back, surprised. She had never heard Star sound quite so resentful before. *That's not true! It's just that I'm going to have responsibilities one day. I'll need to be* ready *for them*.

She found that her litter-sister's accusation stung, more than she'd expected. It wasn't that Star was jealous of Moon's destiny as next Pack Alpha; Star had no interest in the hard work and duties that would come with leadership, and Moon knew she was happy to be a free spirit. But surely Star realized, now that they were both older, that Moon didn't have the same liberty to mess around and play pointless games?

I must learn to be serious and dutiful.

Before she could gnaw at her anxiety any longer, a new sound made Moon's ears prick up. Those were pawsteps coming toward the camp through the undergrowth—yes, the hunt patrol was returning! The hunt-dogs' shapes became recognizable as they drew closer and emerged from the bushes: Rush and Meadow, the wily terriers; Fly, the brown-

and-white snub-nosed dog with the sad but watchful eyes; and in the lead, biggest and strongest of all, was Hunter. Moon felt her heart skip a nervous beat as Hunter's eyes caught hers. He lifted his head slightly with pride; between his strong jaws was a plump and good-sized rabbit.

Moon rose to her paws, ignoring Star's snort of amusement. She dipped her head in solemn greeting, and Hunter gave a low whine of reply in his throat.

He's so well-named, she thought. *He's the strongest dog in the Pack, besides my Father-Dog, and he's the best hunter. I'm glad my parent-dogs chose him for me*.

She sometimes wondered what it was going to be like, running the Pack with Hunter as her Beta. It couldn't be anything but exciting, she decided, with a warm rush of gladness. She ignored the prickle of tension in her neck fur; nervousness and uncertainty were silly. She would be lucky to have such a strong and capable mate. Her parent-dogs had chosen carefully, and they were never wrong about such important Pack matters.

She would go on making her Father-Dog and Mother-Dog proud, and she'd go on showing her gratitude to them and her favor to Hunter. *I don't care what Star thinks about it*, Moon decided a little grumpily. It was true that she didn't feel completely comfortable in Hunter's company—he wasn't the easiest dog to talk to, and he had a stern taciturnity that sometimes bordered on sullenness—but in time, they'd learn to get along. Why, she felt guilty for thinking even the mildest criticism of him; it felt like disloyalty to her parent-dogs. She and Hunter would make a perfect match in the end, she knew it.

Behind Moon, the fir branches rustled as her Father-Dog emerged from the den and shook his fur. He waited expectantly as Hunter padded up to him and dropped the fat rabbit at his forepaws.

"Well done, Hunter! Your day was good, then?"

“It was, Alpha,” replied Hunter, lashing his tail from side to side. “Plentiful prey, though some of it was too fast for the rest of the patrol.”

It wasn’t the first time she’d heard Hunter criticize other dogs in his hunting patrol, but on this occasion Moon was a little startled. Rush and Meadow were very capable stalkers, after all, and long-legged Fly was a swift and agile runner. But as she glanced toward the brown-and-white dog, limping up behind Hunter, she noticed he did look stiff and tired. He placed his paws awkwardly, as if he was trying not to stumble, and his eyes seemed much duller than usual.

“Still, you’ve all done a fine job,” Moon’s Father-Dog was saying. He didn’t seem to have noticed the change in Fly’s condition; he was too busy admiring Hunter’s rabbit. “The Pack will eat well tonight.”

Hunter gave his Alpha a nod of acknowledgment and stepped back, his eyes still shining with pride in his catch, but Moon nudged her litter-sister with her shoulder.

“Fly doesn’t look well,” she whispered to Star. “Don’t you think?”

Star cocked her head, frowning at Fly. He was sitting on his haunches now, his noble head drooping. His lolling tongue looked dry and swollen.

“It was a long hunt,” Star muttered uneasily, “so he’s probably just tired. And hungry—he’ll feel better when we’ve all eaten.”

Moon wasn’t so sure, but she put Fly out of her head for the moment as the Pack began to gather for prey-sharing. Alpha and Beta, as was their right, claimed the first share, taking Hunter’s rabbit between them, but there was plenty of other prey for the rest of the dogs. As soon as his leaders had eaten their fill, Hunter paced forward and selected a juicy squirrel for himself. Moon could forgive the arrogant tilt of his head, the aura of satisfaction that surrounded him. After all, he’d done more than any dog to provide this feast.

She watched him brightly and approvingly, ignoring any unease she felt at his cockiness.

He's my future mate. It's good that he's strong and confident!

She felt Star's breath at her ear. "Look at him," her litter-sister muttered. "Thinks his tail touches the Sky-Dogs. Do you really want to be mated with him?"

It irritated Moon that Star could reawaken all her own uncertainties with a well-placed jibe. "It doesn't matter," she growled quietly. "The Pack needs strong leaders, and that's what Hunter is."

Star licked her chops and lay down with a sigh, clearly deciding the best policy was to keep her jaws shut. Moon was glad. She could feel her hackles bristling, yet she knew she shouldn't let Star's words ruffle her fur. Her sister was talking nonsense, obviously.

All the same, she couldn't help stealing a glance at her parent-dogs. Now that they'd eaten, and their daily responsibilities were behind them for another night, they were chuffing quietly together over some unheard joke. Alpha muttered something in Beta's ear, and in playful impatience she batted his nose with a gentle paw.

They had such a connection, thought Moon wistfully. Her Father-Dog and her Mother-Dog were friends as well as mates, companions as well as leaders. They respected each other, worked well together . . .

Against her will, the inner voice and its doubts rose inside her head. Moon clenched her jaws and rubbed her paws over her ears.

If I wasn't destined to be the Pack's Alpha . . . would I choose Hunter at all?

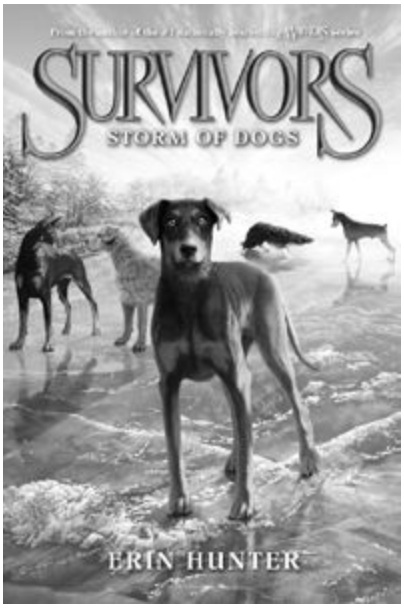
EXCERPT FROM *SURVIVORS #6: STORM OF DOGS*

DON’T MISS

SURVIVORS

BOOK 6:

STORM OF DOGS



CHAPTER ONE

Lucky's eyes snapped open, and a terrified whine escaped his throat. He caught his breath, his ears pricking up. Gone were the crashes and howls of the Trap House.

It was *a dream . . . and we* did *survive!*

He breathed deeply, relief coursing through his limbs. The night air was silent and cool. From the mouth of the den he could see an icy breeze stirring the leafless branches of the trees that dotted the territory. He saw the grassy slope near the top of the cliffs, the place where he and the rescue party had found the Pack after their failed mission to save their friend, Fiery. Sweet had decided that they would stay there, despite the dangers they faced—they had expended too much energy in their endless hunt for safer territories.

Lucky turned to look at Sweet, the Pack's Alpha and his new mate. The swift-dog was curled against Lucky's side, her warm body soothing against his fur as her chest rose and fell in sleep. Her cream muzzle twitched and relaxed, and she snored gently. Lucky felt his whiskers prickle with a familiar sense of affection. He licked her nose very gently. Sweet snuffled, but she didn't wake up.

Rising to his paws and stretching, Lucky peered about their den, a sort of cave built of hedges and ivy. It was the best den in the territory, once claimed by their half-wolf previous Alpha. He shuddered as he thought of the half wolf. *That traitor! Siding with Blade and the Fierce Dogs . . .*

Lucky trod out of the den onto frosty grass that crunched beneath his paws. The trees and the incline of the land blocked the worst of the wind that bounded over the Endless Lake. Still, its icy touch ruffled Lucky's fur, and he shivered. The sky was a thick, dark pelt, with tiny glinting stars like watchful eyes. Lucky picked his way between his sleeping Packmates, who were hunkered down between shrubs. Not all of them had wanted to stay in this territory upon the cliffs, so close to the deserted longpaw town below where the Fierce Dogs had made their lair. Sweet had been resolute: They could make hunting trips over the hills while prey was sparse, but the Pack was staying put. Constantly wandering would tire out every dog. They needed a base, a territory to defend—a camp to call home.

No dog had challenged her authority.

Lucky had wanted to stay too . . . but he had other reasons for believing that they had to make a stand.

As Lucky crept between the dogs, his eyes rested on Storm. Her sleeping body twitched with tension and her top lip sprang up, revealing a long white fang. Muscles clenched beneath her fur—even in sleep, she looked ferocious. Lucky paused, his ears twisting back, wondering what she was dreaming about to make her so tense. It couldn't be the Big Growl—she hadn't even been alive when it had happened.

A low snarl escaped Storm's lips, and Lucky shifted uneasily from paw to paw. Was she reliving her brutal fight with her litter-brother Fang? Nearly a full journey of the Moon-Dog had passed since the fight, and Storm's ugly purple scars had almost healed. The Fierce Dogs' Trial of Rage demanded that one dog kill the other, but they had both survived—Storm had proven her maturity and self-

control, sparing her brother despite his frenzied attack. Remembering the young dog's loyalty and resilience, Lucky's chest swelled with pride.

With a sudden jerk, Storm sprang onto her paws, her eyes wide open, her gaze darting back and forth in the darkness as though she expected an enemy to be there. Then they rested on Lucky and she sat back down, her tail wagging gently.

He padded toward her and touched her nose with his. "How are you feeling?"

Storm flexed her forepaw. "Much better. Look! It doesn't hurt anymore when I put weight on it!" She demonstrated, trotting a circle around Lucky.

Lucky inspected her face. The scratches around her muzzle had healed well, but the missing scrap of her left ear would never grow back. He glanced at the dogs sleeping nearby. "Let's step away from the den."

The young Fierce Dog nodded and followed him to the first of the low trees that led to the pond. "What are you doing up before the Sun-Dog?" she asked.

Lucky sighed. Telling Storm about his dreams would only alarm her. "As the Ice Wind deepens, the Sun-Dog sleeps longer. But we dogs don't have such a luxury." He turned his head away and sniffed the air, trying to hide it from Storm—he thought he could smell the sharp scent of snow.

"The longer we sleep, the more vulnerable we are to attack," Storm agreed. She paused, tilting her dark head. "But perhaps the prey-creatures are also sleeping longer. Maybe we can have an easy hunt!"

Lucky wagged his tail encouragingly. "We can try." He felt the need to be out there, searching between the trees and tracking the territory to the cliffs. The Patrol Dogs kept watch over their territory both night and day, and there'd been no sign of their enemies since the battle between Storm and Fang. But Lucky knew the Wild Dogs couldn't

rest. While Blade and the attack-dogs were out there, his Pack would always be in danger.

The Sun-Dog was flexing his whiskers above the horizon when Storm appeared at Lucky's side. She dropped a large, plump bird, its pale, tawny feathers tipped with gray, by the one that Lucky had already caught. The birds' necks were long and black and their faces were black too, except for thick white marks beneath their beaks. Over the past days, Lucky had seen giant Packs of these birds soaring overhead, flying across the Endless Lake. They all appeared from the same direction, each Pack following their own Alphas.

How do they all know where to go? Lucky wondered, not for the first time. Could the birds sense things that dogs could not, like the direction of warm skies? Did they follow the Sun-Dog to lands where he never fell asleep and it was always bright?

Several of the birds had gathered on the rocks near the cliffs. That was how Lucky and Storm had made their kills—high in the sky, the birds were graceful and fast, but on the rocks they shuffled awkwardly.

Lucky and Storm picked up the prey-creatures and made their way back to the camp. The other dogs were awake, stretching in the low light of sunup while Daisy, who had watched over the Pack as they slept, napped in the Patrol Dogs' den. She lifted her head and the other dogs yipped excitedly as Lucky and Storm approached.

Beetle ran loops around the returning dogs, licking his chops. He was joined by his litter-sister, Thorn, who bounded up to the birds and sniffed them uncertainly.

"What *are* they?" She prodded one with an outstretched paw. "I've never seen such a long neck!"

Beetle's eyes widened, and he paused. "Only Lucky could catch such strange creatures!" he yelped, awestruck. "The Spirit Dogs are on your side!"

Lucky wasn’t sure what sort of birds they were, but before he could answer, Moon padded next to her pups. “They’re geese,” she commented with a wry twitch of her pointed black ears.

Knowing the creatures’ name did nothing to dampen Beetle’s enthusiasm. “Lucky, do you think your Father-Dog could have been a Spirit Dog?” he barked.

Sweet emerged from the den and met Lucky’s eye, her head cocked in amusement.

She’s laughing at me—at Beetle’s hero worship.

“No,” Lucky said quickly, embarrassed. “I’m sure he wasn’t, Beetle.”

Lucky looked back at the pup. He was a little smaller than his litter-sister. Like their Mother-Dog, Moon, his fur was black and white, but his snout was stubby and his limbs were broad. *He’s looking more like Fiery every day. And I guess he’s trying to find someone to replace his Father-Dog*.

After the dogs had shared the geese, taking turns by rank from Sweet down to Sunshine, the Pack Omega, some of them gathered for a fight-training session with Storm. The young Fierce Dog demonstrated how to dodge and block blows as the others watched.

“The trick is speed,” she told them. “Your opponent won’t see you coming. Your aim is to get the advantage, push them to the ground, and hold them by the throat.”

Lucky looked to the assembled dogs, nervously gauging their reactions. Mickey and Snap were doing their best to mimic Storm’s forward dip, outstretching their forepaws. Bruno jutted out his paw with a stiff grunt as Bella and Martha took turns practicing the blocking. Even Whine, usually the first to complain about fight-training, was watching with interest. Lucky gave an inward sigh of relief. None of the dogs seemed to mind taking instructions from Storm, regardless of rank.

It’s good for everyone that the rules are more relaxed than they were under the half wolf. Storm has skills that she can share; it would be foolish to let rank get in the way. Working together . . . that’s what a Pack’s all about.

“Daisy, can I demonstrate the move on you?” asked Storm. “It won’t hurt.”

The wiry-furred white dog gave an excited yip of agreement and stood at attention. Storm jabbed at her with fangs exposed. When Daisy moved to block the Fierce Dog, Storm dived down, dodging Daisy’s teeth and seizing the small dog by her neck. For a moment, she pinned Daisy to the ground. Then she sprang back and Daisy rolled onto her paws.

Storm gave her a friendly lick and turned to the others. “Now you try it.”

“It’s harder for me,” whined Thorn. “My muzzle isn’t as big as yours. Even when I’m fully grown, I’ll never be able to close my jaws around another dog’s neck.”

Storm barked insistently, “Any dog can do this move, even smaller ones. It’s not about size, it’s about confidence. It doesn’t matter if you don’t have the best hold. An enemy—*any enemy*—will panic when he feels fangs at his throat.”

Lucky didn’t doubt that this was true, but he wondered how Storm knew it. And where had she learned the dive-and-block technique? She had been raised by the Wild Pack, not the Fierce Dogs. She had never been *taught* these deadly moves.

She must know how to fight instinctively.

He was glad that the traitorous half wolf wasn’t here to see this. The old Alpha had never trusted Storm. Lucky’s tail dropped a little at the thought, and he watched as Beetle took his position in front of Thorn. The pup’s dark muzzle quivered, and he took a step back. *He’s scared that his litter-sister is going to rip his throat out!* Lucky realized. Was the exercise too tough for the young dogs?

Thorn sprang at him, jabbing with her teeth, as Storm had, before diving down to Beetle's throat. The young dog moved quickly, yipping in triumph, but her litter-brother shook and freed himself, tipping her off balance. Thorn rolled onto her side, and Beetle threw his forepaws on her flank, pinning her down.

Then he glanced nervously at Storm. "I'm sorry . . . that wasn't supposed to happen, I just . . ." He dropped back, head lowered, as his litter-sister rose to her paws with an apologetic whine.

A ripple of apprehension ran down Lucky's back. Moon's pups were only a little younger than Storm, yet they cowered before her. *Is it something Storm's doing—some kind of natural dominance?*

The young Fierce Dog gave Thorn a little nudge. "Don't worry, you're learning—it takes practice to get it right." She turned to Beetle. "And you shouldn't feel bad for having good instincts—they could save you in a fight."

Lucky's tension drained away, and his tail rose with a relieved wag. *Storm isn't the angry attack-dog that Alpha took her for. She's showing patience and understanding. She's more like us than the Fierce Dogs*.

Feeling a wave of pride, Lucky turned and started padding between the trees. Storm didn't need him standing over her. *I trust her*. His paws crunched over the frosty grass as he made his way to the edge of the camp where the cliffs hung over the Endless Lake. The air was salty and so cold that it cut beneath Lucky's fur. Gray clouds gathered in the sky, bringing with them the promise of harsher weather. He closed his eyes, remembering the swirling snow he had seen in the dreams he used to have: the dreams about the Storm of Dogs. When he opened them, he thought he saw a flash of dark fur slip between the trees.

Lucky's breath caught in his throat. He blinked, peering at the trees. Had he imagined it? He trod stealthily over the frost, doing his best to stay quiet. There was no scent on the

air, and no paw prints were etched in the hard ground. He examined the circle of trees, his muzzle low. There was no sign of an unfamiliar dog, but Lucky knew he'd seen someone. His hackles rose as his eyes traced the horizon.

Was some dog here, spying on me?

Rising from the valley, Lucky could hear the yaps of the Wild Pack—they must have finished their training session. It was strange and unsettling to hear them sounding so cheerful and at ease when tension was skittering through Lucky's belly like ants. With a last glance over his shoulder, he turned tail and made his way back to the camp.

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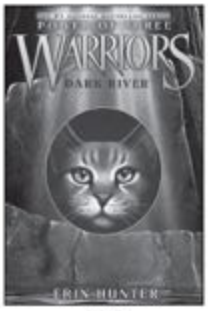

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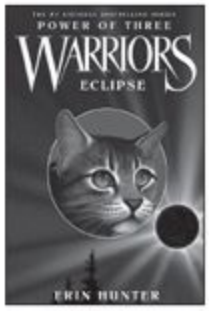

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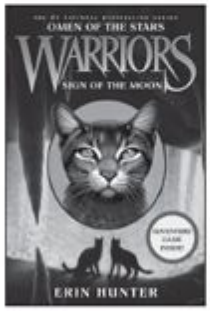

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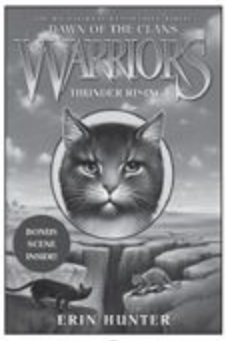

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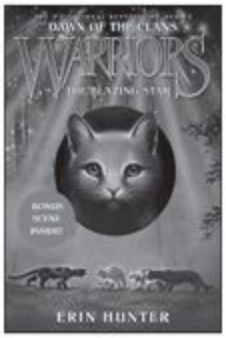

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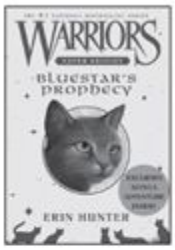

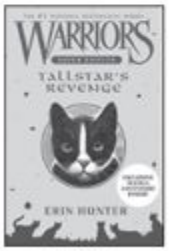

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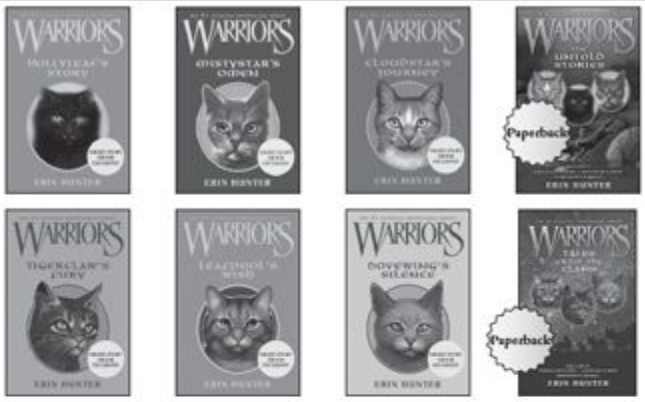

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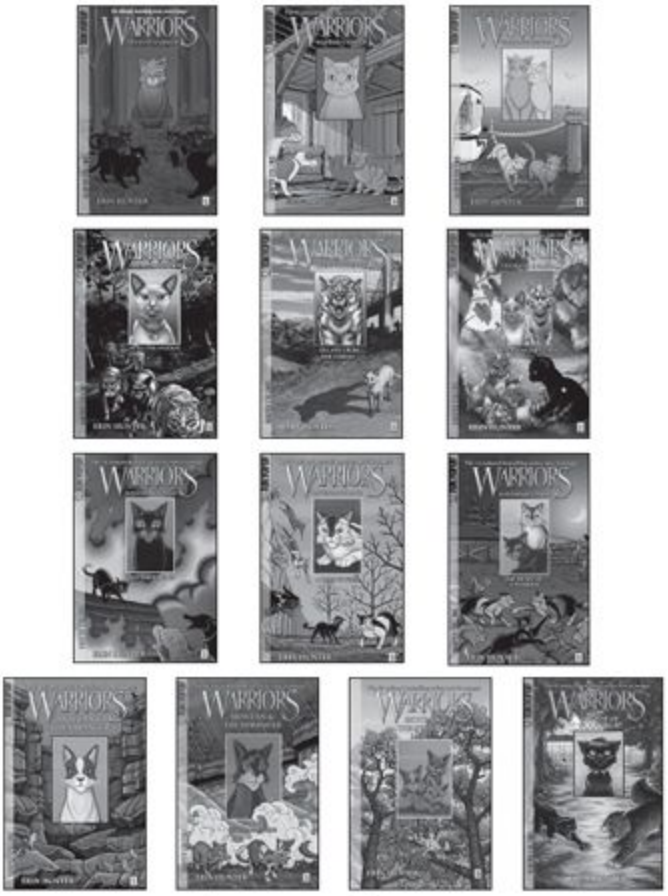

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ERIN HUNTER is inspired by a fascination with the ferocity of the natural world. As well as having great respect for nature in all its forms, Erin enjoys creating rich mythical explanations for animal behavior. She is also the author of the bestselling Warriors and Seekers series.

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